JANUARY 2008
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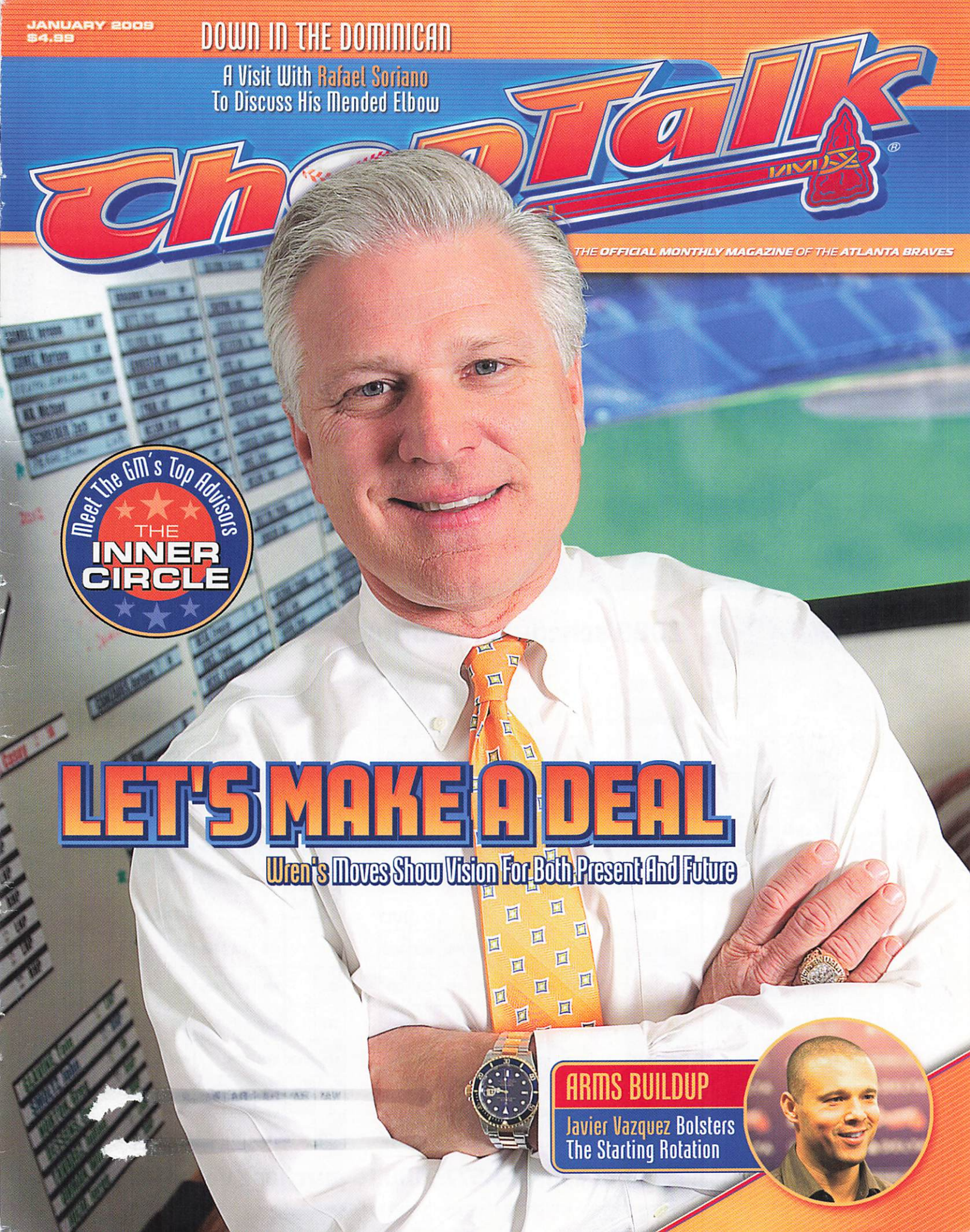
DOWN IN THE DOMINICAN

A Visit With Rafael Soriano
To Discuss His Mended Elbow

chopTalk

THE OFFICIAL MONTHLY MAGAZINE OF THE ATLANTA BRAVES



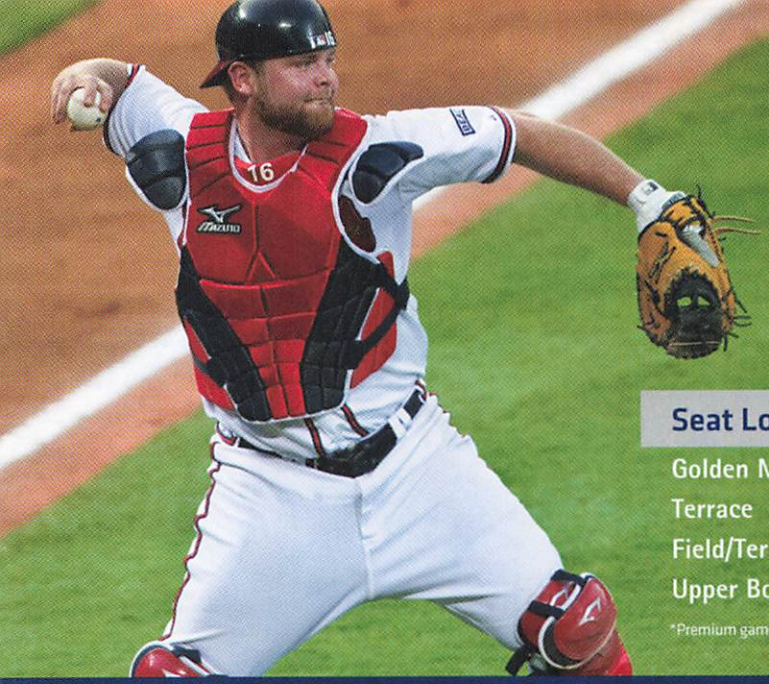
Meet The GM's Top Advisors
THE INNER CIRCLE

LET'S MAKE A DEAL

Wren's Moves Show Vision For Both Present And Future

ARMS BUILDUP

Javier Vazquez Bolsters
The Starting Rotation



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APRIL

		1	2	3 DET*	4 DET*
5 PHI	6	7 PHI	8 PHI	9	10 WAS	11 WAS
12 WAS	13	14 FLA	15 FLA	16 FLA	17 PIT	18 PIT
19 PIT	20 WAS	21 WAS	22 WAS	23	24 CIN	25 CIN
26 CIN	27 STL	28 STL	29 STL	30		

JUNE

	1	2 CHI	3 CHI	4 CHI	5 MIL	6 MIL
7 MIL	8 PIT	9 PIT	10 PIT	11 PIT	12 BAL	13 BAL
14 BAL	15	16 CIN	17 CIN	18 CIN	19 BOS	20 BOS
21 BOS	22	23 NYY	24 NYY	25 NYY	26 BOS	27 BOS
28 BOS	29	30 PHI				

AUGUST

						1 LAD
2 LAD	3 SD	4 SD	5 SD	6 LAD	7 LAD	8 LAD
9 LAD	10	11 WAS	12 WAS	13	14 PHI	15 PHI
16 PHI	17	18 NYM	19 NYM	20 NYM	21 FLA	22 FLA
23 FLA	24	25 SD	26 SD	27 SD	28 PHI	29 PHI
30 PHI	31 FLA					

MAY

					1 HOU	2 HOU
3 HOU	4 NYM	5 NYM	6 FLA	7 FLA	8 PHI	9 PHI
10 PHI	11 NYM	12 NYM	13 NYM	14	15 ARI	16 ARI
17 ARI	18 COL	19 COL	20 COL	21 COL	22 TOR	23 TOR
24 TOR	25 SF	26 SF	27 SF	28 ARI	29 ARI	30 ARI
31 ARI						

JULY

			1 PHI	2 PHI	3 WAS	4 WAS
5 WAS	6 CHI	7 CHI	8 CHI	9 COL	10 COL	11 COL
12 COL	13	14 ALL STAR GAME ST LOUIS	15	16 NYM	17 NYM	18 NYM
19 NYM	20 SF	21 SF	22 SF	23 SF	24 MIL	25 MIL
26 MIL	27	28 FLA	29 FLA	30 FLA	31 LAD	

SEPT/OCT

	1 FLA	2 FLA	3 FLA	4 CIN	5 CIN	
6 CIN	7	8 HOU	9 HOU	10 HOU	11 STL	12 STL
13 STL	14	15 NYM	16 NYM	17 NYM	18 PHI	19 PHI
20 PHI	21 NYM	22 NYM	23 NYM	24	25 WAS	26 WAS
27 WAS	28 FLA	29 FLA	30 FLA	1 WAS	2 WAS	3 WAS
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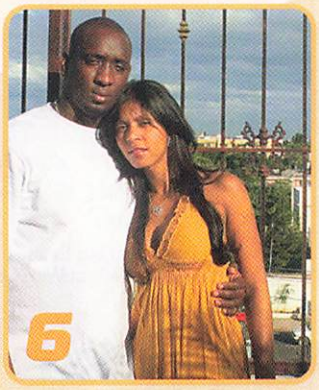

JON ANDERSON

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NATIONAL BASEBALL HALL OF FAMES

NATIONAL BASEBALL HALL OF FAMES

PAUL ABELL/ATLANTA BRAVES

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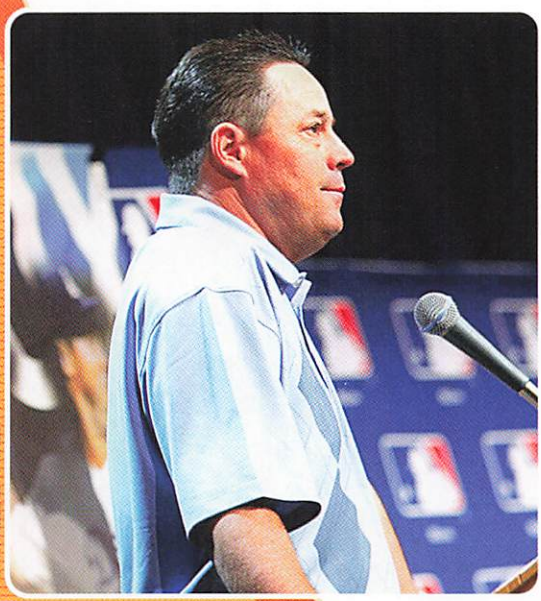

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OUT OF THIS WORLD!

BY PATTY RASMUSSEN

We always knew ChopTalk was "out of this world," and now we have a photo to prove it!

On Nov. 25, NASA astronaut Shane Kimbrough sent me an e-mail containing this picture from the International Space Station, located roughly 220 miles from Earth.

What a thrill it was to know that this loyal Braves fan not only took the November issue of ChopTalk with him when the Space Shuttle Endeavour launched on Nov. 14, but that he also had this picture taken with it and e-mailed it from space for all ChopTalk readers to see.

This story began Sept. 27, when Kimbrough and his family, who live near Houston, enjoyed a visit with Braves players and coaches during batting practice, as reported in the November issue of CT.

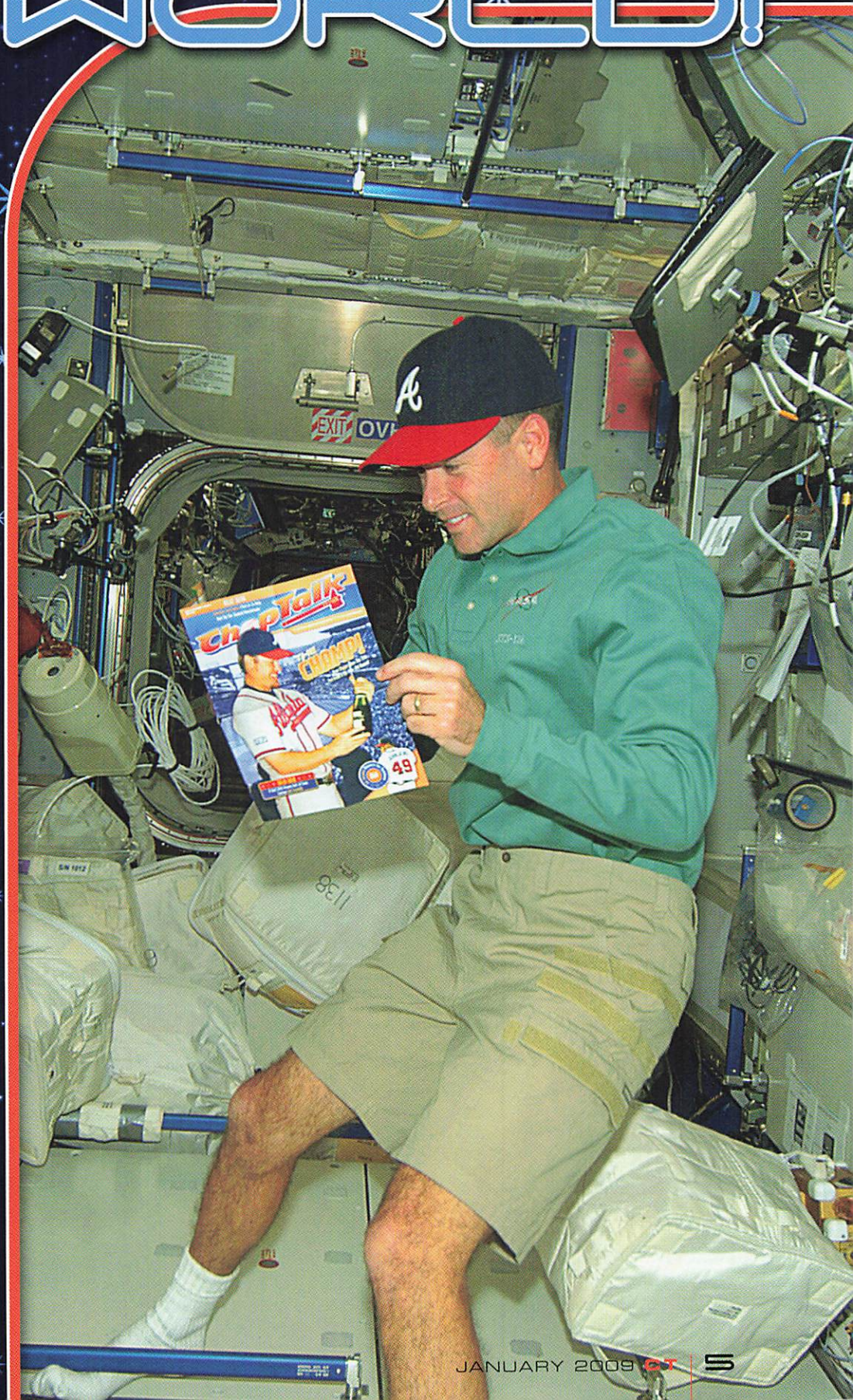
I exchanged e-mail addresses with Shane and his wife, Robbie, and made sure they had a couple of copies of the November CT.

On the evening of Nov. 14, I watched CNN as Kimbrough and his fellow astronauts launched on a 15-day mission during which they would dock with the International Space Station. Imagine my excitement when I opened my e-mail two days later to a message from Kimbrough labeled, "Greetings from space."

"Patty," read the message, "I hope you got a chance to watch our launch. We've heard it was spectacular from the ground. It was an amazing ride to orbit to say the least. We are working hard and having fun too. Later today we dock with the space station. Hope all is well with you."

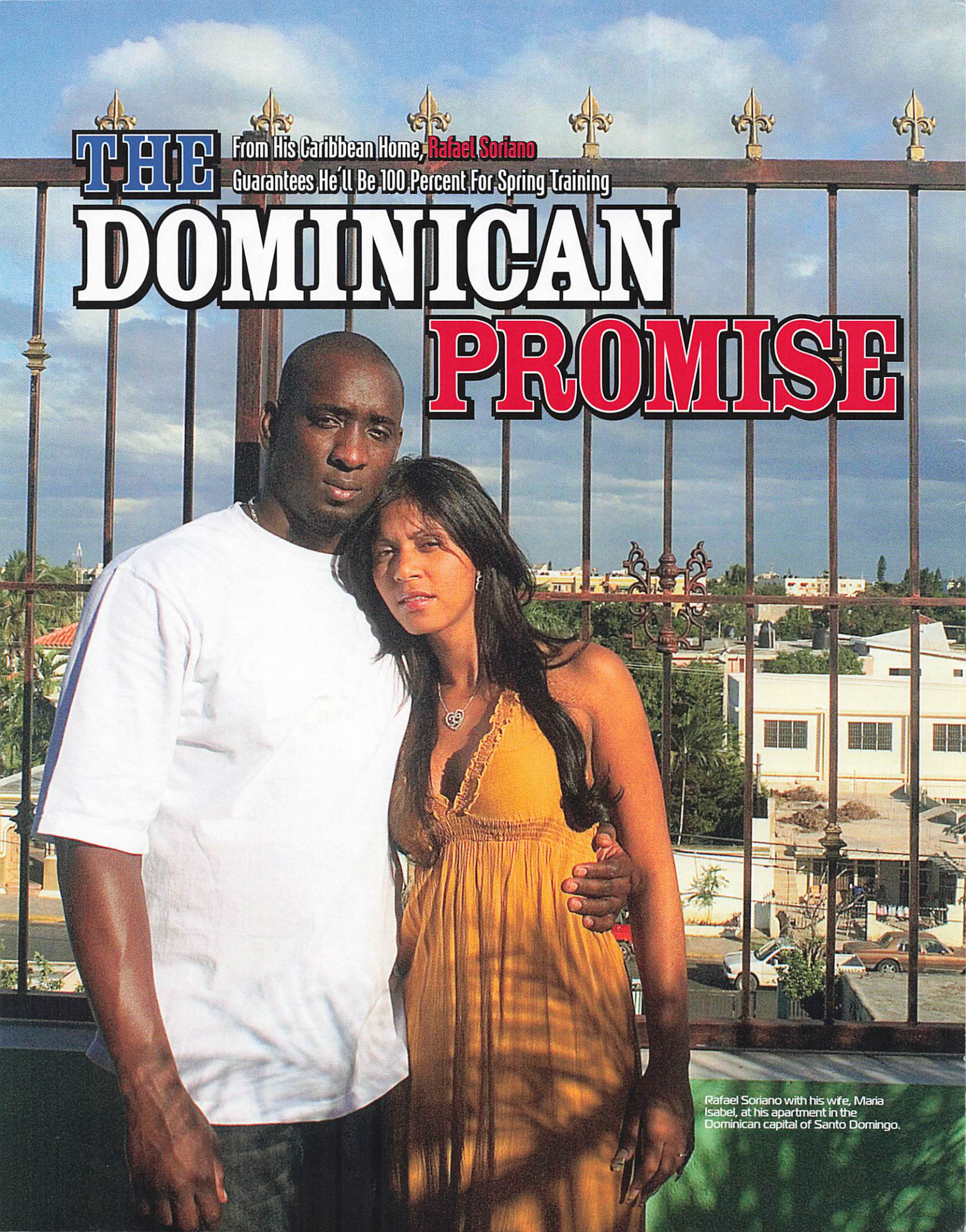
I followed the progress of the Endeavour mission, through the good, the bad, and the lost tool belt. On Nov. 25, Shane sent the e-mail with this picture. He wrote, "Hope you like the picture. Feel free to pass it along. I just got inside after my spacewalk. We did a lot of great work and had some pretty amazing views."

The shuttle landed at Edwards Air Force Base in California on Nov. 30. Congratulations to Shane and his fellow astronauts on their successful mission.

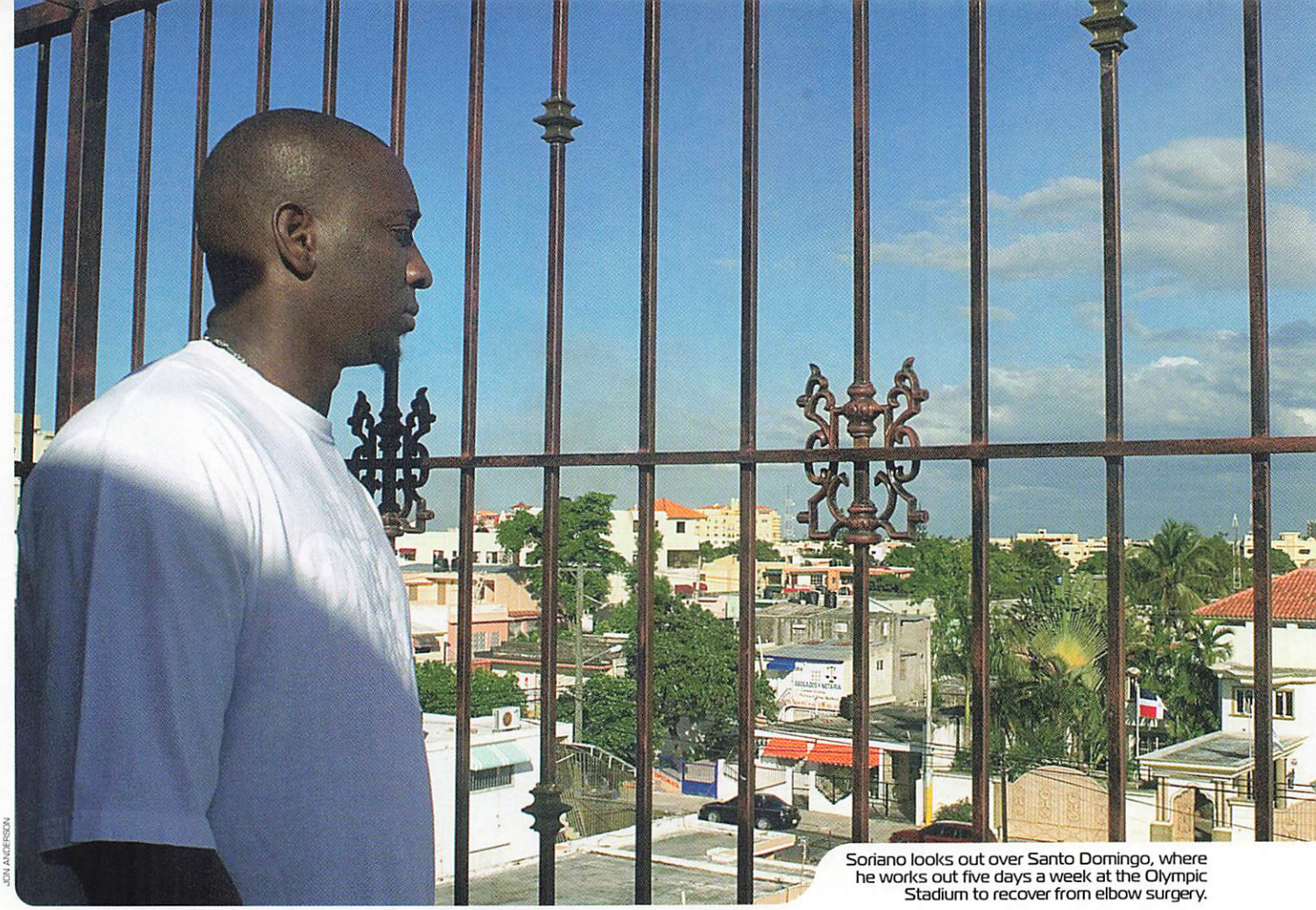


THE DOMINICAN PROMISE

From His Caribbean Home, Rafael Soriano Guarantees He'll Be 100 Percent For Spring Training



Rafael Soriano with his wife, Maria Isabel, at his apartment in the Dominican capital of Santo Domingo.



JON ANDERSON

Soriano looks out over Santo Domingo, where he works out five days a week at the Olympic Stadium to recover from elbow surgery.

BY JON ANDERSON

Rafael Soriano is a man on whom many people pin their hopes. The Braves, their fans, his family and friends... They all look to him to finalize matters, and Soriano is determined not to disappoint.

Anointed the Braves' "closer" a year ago, Soriano endured a season of pain, uncertainty and only 14 innings of work, succumbing to surgery and thus failing to fulfill his mission and the trust the Braves bestowed in him.

A proud man who possesses immense talent, the 30-year-old Dominican who became a lost asset for the Braves last year vows from his apartment in Santo Domingo that he'll be back to reclaim a prominent role in the Atlanta bullpen in 2009.

Asked if he will be at full strength for the season-opener April 5 in Philadelphia, Soriano exclaimed, "April? February! I will be there for training in February - 100 percent!"

There's no mistaking the look of conviction in his eye. A man of few words, he is undoubtedly a man of his word. It's a promise, a guarantee, as far as he's concerned.

Whether or not he will be able to win the job of closer that Mike Gonzalez staked a claim to last year remains to be seen, but if Soriano is fully recovered from ulnar nerve transposition surgery in his right elbow, he will provide the Braves an intimidating weapon in a bullpen that should be a team strength.

In case Soriano's inactivity in 2008 has caused his qualifications to be forgotten, a review shows that in 2007, his first year with the Braves, he was second among all National League pitchers in lowest on-base percentage allowed (.209). In 2006-07 combined, he was fifth in the majors in lowest batting average allowed (.192).

In 2007, his only full season as a Brave, opponents batted but .181 against him. Even last year, in 14 appearances made with pain in his elbow, opponents batted just .149 against him. In 14 innings, he allowed only 7 hits and struck out 16.

After being used primarily as a setup man for most of his

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

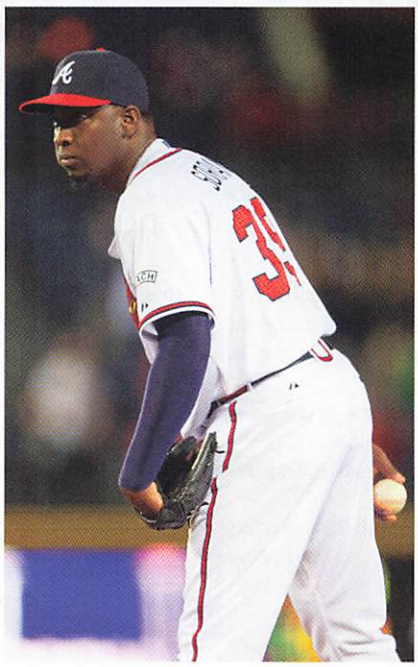
PAUL ABELL/ ATLANTA BRAVES

The powerful righthander was ticketed to be the Braves' closer last year but was able to work just 14 innings.

JON ANDERSON

Rafael and Maria Isabel try to make the most of their time together during the off-season, because she remains in the Dominican Republic when he is pitching in the States.

JON ANDERSON



PAUL ABELL/ATLANTA BRAVES

career, Soriano was thrilled with the confidence the Braves showed in him last year by signing him to a two-year contract and thrusting him into the closer's job. He says there is nothing he likes more than to enter a game to preserve a win, to be the man the Braves rely on at that most-crucial moment. He relishes the challenge and thrives on the fan support that swells up from the stadium and sweeps him to the mound.

"Me gusta la bulla!" he said in good Dominican, meaning, "I love the racket!"

Imagine then what he must have felt after seeing his hopes dashed last year by a quirk of nature. The opponent he faced was not the batter - it was his own elbow. Pitching was wrecking that arm.

The pain developed back in April. His ulnar nerve, which crosses along the left side of the elbow joint, was scraping the bone and becoming inflamed. Every time he snapped the ball, the nerve snapped back. He fought it. He pitched well, but he pitched much less than he was meant to - a few games and then it was back on the disabled list. No one was more disappointed than Soriano was.

"I wanted to play, not sit there," he said.

Sit he did, though. On April 9, barely a week after the season opened, he went on the disabled list after four outings for the first of three stretches due to elbow pain. He wasn't activated until more than a month and a half later, May 28. He pitched five times and was back on the DL June 14 with the same mysterious pain that doctors could not attribute to anything more than tendinitis. He sat out five weeks this time, returning July 21 for one last try. There were five more appearances, and then he was shut down Aug. 3 and directed to the last resort - surgery.

Soriano wasn't downhearted, though. He is not a man easily swayed by the misfortunes of life. He knew what he had to do, and he pursued his goal as he had always done, with composure, discipline, and an abiding love for the game. After the surgery on Aug. 28 that moved the nerve above and to the right of the bone, he began a strict rehabilitation routine back in his native Dominican Republic.

The routine is nothing new to him, because he underwent more serious Tommy John surgery on Aug. 17, 2004. He brings to the therapy sessions the same determination that catapulted him as a youngster from Andres Boca Chica, a small sugar mill town and tourist spot, to the major leagues.

Every week, Monday to Friday, Soriano heads to the Olympic Stadium in the center of Santo Domingo to work out. While the doctors set out an overall schedule for him, designed to fortify the arm over a three-month period, their advice counts for less at this point, since the surgery marks the end of what they can do for him. They prescribed the amount of time he spends exercising and the number of pitches a day he can throw.

But the man Soriano counts on is his Dominican trainer, Precinao Doñé, unknown to American fans, but a key figure in Dominican circles. All the Dominican ballplayers, from Sammy Sosa on down, know him and seek his advice.

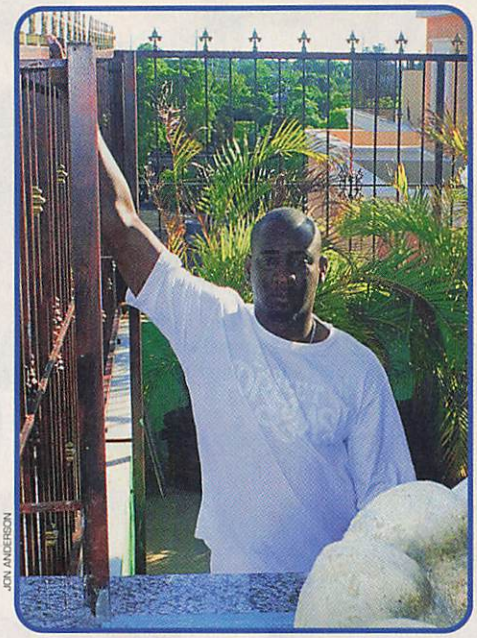
According to Soriano, the training he receives is superior. However, the facilities where he trains wouldn't impress

Americans, who are used to seeing state-of-the-art gizmos straight out of a sci-fi film. These days in Santo Domingo, there isn't even enough electricity to light the bulbs at the stadium. And no special arrangements are made to accommodate this shooting star, either. Soriano, the American League Rookie Pitcher of the Year in 2003 (3-0, 1.53 with 68 strikeouts in 53 innings), shows up to work, just like any other joe.

So, maybe what makes all the difference is that touch of extemporaneous inventiveness that characterizes the way a people with few resources are compelled to confront the ups and downs of life. You don't learn this at school, unless we're talking about the school of hard knocks.

Doñé has Soriano training according to a routine that is specially adapted to his needs and talent. It's not just physical, it's artful.

There are the usual workouts in the gym - the running and the massages, as expected. Soriano contributes his own ingredient with occasional dips in his Jacuzzi, situated on the balcony of his penthouse apartment.



JON ANDERSON

Soriano, who likes to play dominoes and listen to bachata music, is a man of simple pleasures.

But the clincher is provided by Doñé and is based in the wisdom of his long experience working with assorted ballplayers. Three times a week, Soriano practices pitching. A day on, a day off. Five minutes of throwing, then a rest. Five more minutes of throwing that way, then a changeup.

The 6-1, 220-pound Soriano, who was acquired from Seattle in exchange for Horacio Ramirez on Dec. 7, 2006, hints that there is more to it than merely building up his strength. He's working on his style.

It's a holistic approach that embraces the same principles governing that harmony players seek when they talk about being "in the zone." That is how he manages to withstand the everyday pressures facing a major league ballplayer, as well as the crippling consequences of an injury like this one.

At his core, he demonstrates a quiet inner strength that admits no defeat and humbly asks only to be tested. He lives for that totally absorbing connection to the fans, to his teammates, and to the moment when he delivers the ball.

"Well, above all, I put it all to God," he said. "But these are the lessons I've learned from life, and I accept the obstacles I have to face. I look inside to find the strength I know is there."

That power of inner resolve keeps him on course and helps him reconcile the competing demands, which are all the more difficult, given that he lives a life divided between two countries.

In the off-season, he lives at home with family and friends and visits his accustomed haunts. Being a major leaguer with a substantial contract doesn't seem to have changed him a bit. He has a split-level penthouse apartment in a quiet part of the capital city's eastern zone. But while the house is comfortable and inviting, it is not ostentatious. It is plain and sincere, like its owner.

Luxuries don't seem to interest Soriano, who originally signed with Seattle as a first baseman in 1997 and converted to pitching two years later. He focuses on family instead. Weekdays are dedicated to baseball, and weekends to the family. They gather at Boca Chica to enjoy its beach and the simple pleasures of their family relationship. He has five children, two boys (Rafael Jr. and Rafael Alberto) and three girls (Loidys, Rafaela and Aracelis), ranging in age from 2 to 11.

"We just like to be together, to talk, to joke around, do all the things a family normally does," he said.

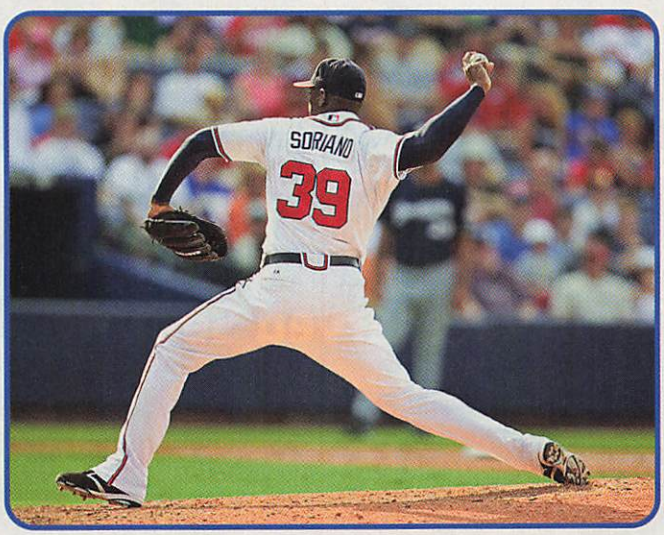
A typical Dominican in his tastes, Soriano admits to a weakness for playing dominoes and listening to the music of bachata, a style that has overtaken merengue in popularity. His favorite musician is the legendary and prolific Antony Santos.

But Soriano's eyes light up when he talks about his kids, including one son who is already demonstrating an interest in following his father's footsteps. Like most dads, he worries about their future and is considering moving the family to the States, where they could enjoy the benefits of a good education and more ample economic opportunities. When Soriano is in Atlanta, he sorely misses the children, and he calls home every day to check on them. Nor can his wife, Maria Isabel, be with him during those trying months of separation, because of the difficulties surrounding the granting of visas. They accept the challenges philosophically.

Maria Isabel pursues her course of study at the state university, Universidad Autónoma de St Domingo, and Soriano adheres to his schedule, as always. When he isn't pitching, he can be found in his Atlanta apartment, listening to bachata and cooking his favorite Dominican dishes.

Will Soriano be ready to fill everyone's expectations this season? Will he be sitting or playing on Opening Day?

At least in his mind, there is no doubt that the pain of 2008 is behind him, and his arm is finally prepared to realize the promise the Braves see in him during an exciting and fulfilling New Year.



PAUL ABELL/ ATLANTA BRAVES

In 2007, his only full season of pitching in the National League, opponents batted a measly .181 against Soriano.

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BY JAY BUSBEE

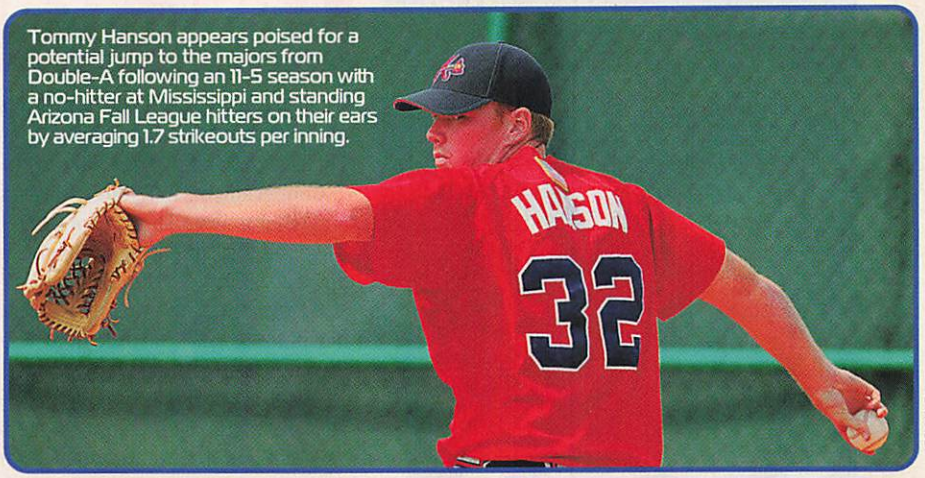
THE LOOKS OF AN ACE IN THE MAKING?

MINOR-LEAGUE PHENOMS are like hurricanes. You hear about them by word-of-mouth long before you ever catch sight of him. Braves fans outside the Atlanta area were hearing the name "Jeff Francoeur" for years, thanks to his high school heroics, but until Francoeur made it to the bigs in 2005, most fans wouldn't have known if they were standing next to him at a Chick-fil-A line.

Phenoms carry the hope of the future on their shoulders, and that's why we start talking about them years before they're ready to make an impact. You don't tend to imagine that your stellar farmhands are going to come to the majors and go 8-12 with a 4.45 ERA. No, you make plans for the 2010 and 2011 post-seasons. And right now, you're doing it because of a monstrous, 6-foot-6 bear of a Brave by the name of Tommy Hanson.

Hanson, as you no doubt know, is the crown prince pitcher of the Braves' minor league system, a California fireballer who's scaring the snot out of opposing hitters and inspiring coaches and media to pen hymns of giddy praise.

You need no further proof of the Braves' belief in Hanson than the fact that they absolutely refused to include him in any deal for San Diego's Jake Peavy. As of this writing, Peavy remains a Padre, even though he's by far the best value-to-talent pitcher available. But the Braves determined that Hanson's potential (and, of course, lower short-term price) exceeded the value of bringing the 2007 Cy Young Award winner to Atlanta on a long-term deal.



Tommy Hanson appears poised for a potential jump to the majors from Double-A following an 11-5 season with a no-hitter at Mississippi and standing Arizona Fall League hitters on their ears by averaging 1.7 strikeouts per inning.

TOM PRIDDY

> "HANSON... IS THE CROWN PRINCE PITCHER OF THE BRAVES' MINOR LEAGUE SYSTEM, A CALIFORNIA FIREBALLER WHO'S SCARING THE SNOT OUT OF OPPOSING HITTERS."

But who is Tommy Hanson, and what's he done to warrant this kind of lionization? Well... nothing, really, other than storm through leagues stocked with career minor-leaguers. But the potential is there, and potential is always golden.

It's tough to call anybody who's 22 years old a "late bloomer," but in a way, Hanson is. He was a catcher growing up and, according to local lore, didn't have his big growth spurt until his sophomore year of high school. Unlike many young stars, he didn't draw any attention out of high school. His fastball didn't even touch 90 mph until he enrolled at Riverside (Calif.) Community College.

From there, though, it's been the proverbial jaw-dropping scorch through the minor leagues. Already armed with an excellent fastball, Hanson has recently added a wicked slider to his arsenal, wisely understanding that heat only takes a pitcher so far. The early knock on him was that he gave up a lot of flyball outs, but as he's progressed, he's been able to break down hitters every which way.

Need proof? He threw a no-hitter at Mississippi last season when he compiled an 11-5 record and 2.41 ERA across two teams. In the Arizona Fall League, Hanson threw up an astonishing 5-0 record with a 0.63 ERA and 49 strikeouts in 28 2/3 innings. Rocket Wheeler, Hanson's manager on the Mesa Solar Sox, drew comparisons between Hanson and another of his former players, Cy Young winner Roy Halladay of Toronto.

(Unrelated aside: Is there any other profession where the words of a man named "Rocket Wheeler" are not just accepted, but respected? Baseball is awesome.)

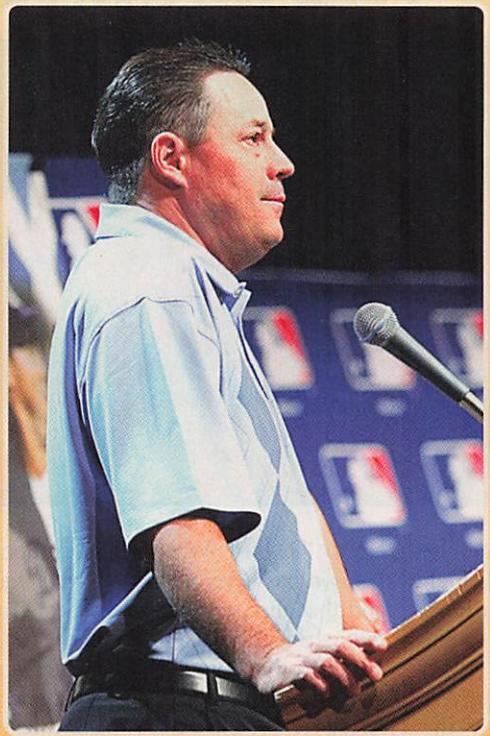
Baseball experts — men with names similar to "Rocket" Wheeler — caution that Hanson has never pitched above Double A, and that the next level of ball could prove quite the leveler. Many's the pitcher or hitter who's stormed through the lower levels of the alphabet only to run into a buzzsaw when facing recent- and almost-major leaguers.

Another Tommy learned this lesson a few years back. In his very first Triple-A start, he gave up a grand slam to Pawtucket in the third inning, then proceeded to load the bases before getting yanked. The next pitcher surrendered another grand slam, which marked, according to the Providence Journal, the first time in the 100-plus-year history of the International League that a team gave up two grand slams in one inning. (That particular Tommy — last name Glavine — would do better.)

For now, Hanson is in a perfect situation. We're projecting our hopes and dreams onto him, but he's not in any kind of position where he has to pay off. Even as the Braves have reassured both fans and Hanson himself that Tommy isn't going anywhere, they've added that he probably won't be ready to pitch in the rotation until late in 2009, if then.

Which is the right thing to do... You've got an asset like this, why screw it up and work Hanson until his arm falls off, Kerry Wood-style? Bring him along slowly, keep a locker warm for him, and all will be just fine come 2010.

But the way Hanson's pitching so far, I think we can go ahead and engrave his name onto the 2013 Cy Young Award. Or am I getting ahead of myself?



ETHAN MILLER/GETTY IMAGES

It's safe for Braves fans to start planning a trek to Cooperstown, N.Y., in July 2014 to watch Greg Maddux's induction into the National Baseball Hall of Fame.

LONG-TERM PLANNING

YES, GREG MADDUX officially announced his retirement Dec. 8, at baseball's Winter Meetings in Las Vegas, which happens to be where Maddux lives. The site of what may be his next major public speech won't be as convenient.

Cooperstown, N.Y., isn't the easiest town to reach. Nevertheless, Maddux and what may be an army of Braves fans will converge on the quaint site of the Baseball Hall of Fame in the summer of 2014 when the winner of 355 career games - eighth on the all-time list - is inducted into the shrine.

Before entering into any debate about what cap Maddux will be wearing on his plaque, rest assured it will have an Atlanta "A" and not a Cubs "C." Remember, Maddux won 194 of his 355 games (55 percent) as a Brave from 1993-2003, not to mention three of his four straight Cy Young Awards. He pitched for the Cubs eight full seasons and parts of two others, winning 133 games (37 percent) and one Cy Young.

Here's the Hall of Fame's official policy on the cap a player is pictured in on his plaque:

"The choice of which team's logo appears on a player's plaque is the Museum's decision, though we always consider the wishes of an inductee. As a history Museum, it's important that the logo be emblematic of the historical accomplishments of that player's career. A player's election to the Hall of Fame is a career achievement, and as such, every team for whom he played is listed on the plaque; however, the logo selection is based on where that player makes his most indelible mark."

Case closed. Maddux's election is guaranteed on the first ballot. It will be announced in January 2014, after the automatic five-year waiting period, and he'll be enshrined in July 2014. Start planning your vacation now!

WHAT A WAY TO GO

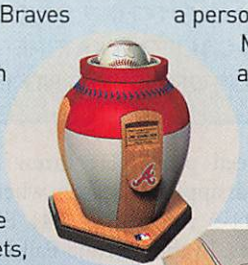
THERE'S A NEW MEANING to being a "diehard" fan, a new way to demonstrate your love for the Braves has no bounds.

It's no longer enough to show your support with a Braves cap, jacket, t-shirt and autographed ball. The really serious fan, no doubt, is going to want to take advantage of what a Michigan-based company is marketing.

Armed with a license from Major League Baseball, Eternal Image is offering logo caskets, urns and medallion headstone markers to those who want to show their devotion to their favorite team for eternity.

The caskets sell for $4,499 and feature an embroidered logo on the lining and the pillow, as well as on the exterior that is made of 18-gauge steel accented with wood that would have looked good as a bat.

Urns, made of die-cast aluminum, sell for $799 and include a home plate base and a dome that contains a baseball suitable for autographing by the departed fan's loved ones or that could be replaced by a signed ball from a personal collection.



Medallion headstone markers are the newest addition to the line and sell for $199. They are made of a half pound of solid bronze and can be attached to all types of monuments.

Visit eternalimage.net for additional information.

TUG OF WAR

ATLANTA BRAVES

THE BRAVES and the Kansas City Royals had an interesting little battle going on for a pitcher named Jairo Cuevas (HIGH-row KWAY-vahs) who's pitched just three games above Class A. Cuevas, a Dominican righthander who turns 25 this month, was signed in 2003 (as a third baseman) and developed over the past six seasons by the Braves. He had shoulder surgery Aug. 22 and isn't likely to pitch again until mid-season or later.

Nevertheless, follow the bouncing transactions:

The Royals, whose general manager is Dayton Moore, former head of the Atlanta farm system, claimed Cuevas on waivers from the Braves Oct. 24... The Braves re-claimed him Nov. 26 when KC failed to put him on their 40-man roster... Only to have the Royals do the same Dec. 10. If that sounds a little much, Kansas City then non-tendered him Dec. 12, making him a free agent and proceeded to sign him to a minor league contract.

Cuevas was 0-2 with a 7.50 ERA last season at Mississippi and tried to work his way through arm trouble with four appearances in the rookie Gulf Coast League (1-0, 2.00) before undergoing surgery. However, he is regarded as a power starting pitcher. In 2005, he was named Appalachian League Pitcher of the Year at rookie-level Danville where he was 6-1 with a 1.94 ERA. On June 12, 2007, he worked eight innings of no-hit ball for Myrtle Beach before giving up a hit in the ninth.

HOW DO THEY DO THAT?

PREP DISNEY FOR THE BRAVES

FOR SEVERAL WEEKS each year, Disney's Wide World of Sports Complex becomes the Braves' home. In addition to the thousands of fans who watch their games, the team has major and minor league ballplayers and club personnel all coming to the spring training facility. Getting it ready requires contributions from numerous people.

As soon as the regular season ends, Disney Sports begins thinking about promotional campaigns for spring training. Season tickets first go on sale in November.

The Braves clubhouse staff arrives at Disney's Wide World of Sports Complex with a large truck in early February. They prepare the clubhouse at Champion Stadium before pitchers and catchers report in mid-February. Melissa Stone comes to Florida at the same time to set up the front office space and handle logistics related to their move. Stone, the executive assistant to John Schuerholz and Frank Wren, gets all the phones up and running in the offices and clubhouse and arranges to rent office equipment.

The Braves baseball operations and media relations staffs arrive about five days after Stone. Once that happens, they hold a meeting with key Disney personnel to discuss everything related to spring training.

The playing surface at Champion Stadium gets used all year round, which makes it easier for the grounds crew to prepare for the first spring training game. The adjacent practice fields also stay in good shape throughout the year. Disney doesn't hire seasonal employees for spring training, but uses its permanent staff from the sports complex for jobs like ushers and concession workers.

After the final game is played at Champion Stadium, preparations for the next spring training begin right away.

"We talk to the Braves as soon as they leave spring training every year to discuss ways to improve the guest experience, help better facilitate their needs, and think about ways to build on the overall experience for the next year," said Ben Cafardo of Disney Sports.

- STEVE FALL

ALLISON SHRREFFS

SPRING IS NEAR

THE HEARTS AND MINDS of many people may turn to love on Feb. 14, but this year, the hearts and minds of Braves fans also will turn to baseball on Valentine's Day. That's the date of one of the most-significant events of the year - pitchers and catchers report to Disney's Wide World of Sports Complex outside Orlando, Fla., for the beginning of spring training.

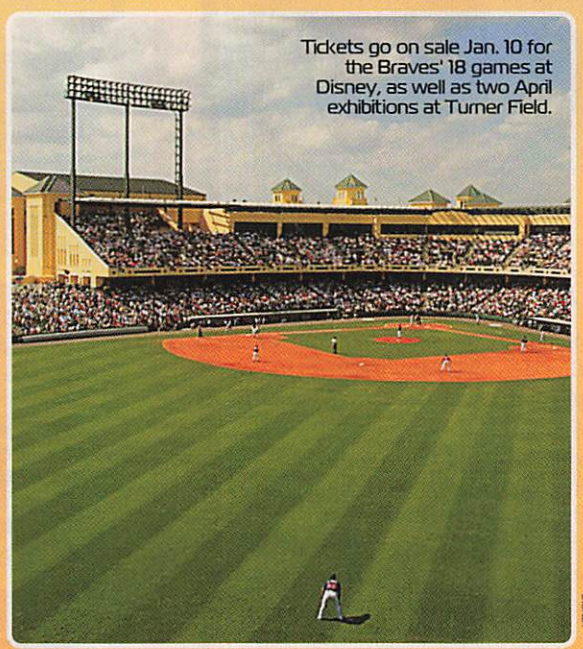
Pitchers and catchers have their first workout Feb. 15. The remainder of the team reports Feb. 17 in advance of the first full-squad workout Feb. 18. This is the Braves' 12th season at Disney's Wide World of Sports.

Bobby Cox's team will play a 35-game schedule, beginning Feb. 25 against Detroit in Lakeland. The Braves' home exhibition schedule starts Feb. 26 at Disney's 9,500-seat Champion Stadium against Houston.

There are 18 games scheduled at Disney, including two World Baseball Classic exhibitions - Mar. 3 against Panama and Mar. 5 against Venezuela. The Braves also continue their tradition of closing the exhibition season with two games at Turner Field. They will host Detroit April 3 and 4 in Atlanta.

The Disney schedule is highlighted by two games each against the Yankees (Mar. 4 and 28), Mets (Mar. 17 and 21) and World Champion Phillies (Mar. 1 and 8), as well as one game against the Red Sox (Mar. 30). There are three night games at Disney - Mar. 6 vs. Houston, Mar. 19 vs. Detroit and Mar. 24 vs. Pittsburgh.

See page 49 of this issue for the complete schedule and ticket information. Individual game tickets for Braves' exhibition games at Disney and at Turner Field go on sale Saturday, Jan. 10, at 10 a.m. Tickets for games at Disney can be purchased at the Disney Wide World of Sports box office, at braves.com, and via Ticketmaster (1-800-839-3900) and Ticketmaster.com. Tickets for the two exhibition games at Turner Field can be purchased at braves.com, through Ticketmaster (1-800-326-4000) and at Publix Ticketmaster locations.



Tickets go on sale Jan. 10 for the Braves' 18 games at Disney, as well as two April exhibitions at Turner Field.

ODD MAN OUT

The Braves did not tender a contact to **Chuck James** by the Dec. 12 deadline, thus making him a free agent. The club's other arbitration-eligible players - **Matt Diaz**, **Jeff Francoeur**, **Mike Gonzalez**, **Omar Infante**, **Kelly Johnson** and **Casey Kotchman** - were tendered contracts.

"We decided to non-tender Chuck because we needed a spot on the 40-man roster for some flexibility, and Chuck probably won't pitch in 2009," said **Frank Wren**.

James, a 28-year-old lefthander, had shoulder surgery Sept. 12. He was 2-5 with a 9.10 ERA last year and is 24-19, 4.48 for his career. Wren said the Braves are open to signing James to a minor league contract.

NEW TROOPS

The Braves strengthened their pitching and catching with a pair of moves Dec. 4 and 5. **Frank Wren** acquired right-handed starter **Javier Vazquez** and left-handed reliever **Boone Logan** from the White Sox Dec. 4, and the following day signed free agent catcher **Dave Ross** to a two-year contract to back up **Brian McCann**.

The Braves gave up four prospects, including power-hitting catcher **Tyler Flowers**, to get Vazquez and Logan. Along with Flowers, they sent shortstop **Brent Lillibridge**, third baseman **Jon Gilmore** and lefty **Santos Rodriguez** to the White Sox.

Vazquez is a key piece of Wren's effort to rebuild a starting rotation that was ravaged by injuries last year. The 32-year-old righthander from Puerto Rico, who is under contract for the next two seasons, has a career record of 127-129 with a 4.32 in 11 seasons. He ranks ninth among active pitchers in strikeouts, 14th in innings and 15th in starts. He was 12-16, 4.67 last year. In 2007, he was 15-8, 3.73. He's worked at least 198 innings in each of the last nine years and finished in his league's top 10 in strikeouts eight of the last nine seasons.

Logan, 24, was 2-3, 5.95 in 55 games for the White Sox last year. See page 27 for more on Vazquez and page 47 for more on Logan.

Ross, 31, split last season between Cincinnati and Boston, appearing in only 60 games, He has a .222 career batting average. His power and arm are his most-outstanding attributes. He hit 21 home runs in 2006 (247 at-bats) and 17 in '07 (311 at-bats). His 41 home runs in the last three seasons rank 11th among all major league catchers.

Ross has thrown out 35 percent of attempted baserunners (77 of 218) in his seven-year big league career. He has the fifth-best percentage in the majors since 2002.

ROSTER MOVES

The Braves added four players to their 40-man roster Nov. 20. They purchased the

contracts of infielder **Diory Hernandez** and right-handed pitchers **Todd Redmond** and **Stephen Marek** and claimed left-handed pitcher **Eric O'Flaherty** off waivers from the Seattle Mariners.

Hernandez, 24, spent last season at Mississippi (Double A) and Richmond (Triple A). He hit .286 with two home runs and eight RBIs 22 games at Mississippi before being promoted to Richmond on April 26. In 120 games at Triple A, he hit .288 with five home runs, 23 doubles and 53 RBIs. He played second base, third base and shortstop at both levels.

Redmond, 23, was named Southern League Pitcher of the Year, appearing in 28 games (27 starts) with Mississippi. He had a 13-5 record with a 3.52 ERA in 166 1/3 innings. His 13 wins led the Southern League, and his 133 strikeouts tied for the lead.

Marek, 25, was acquired on July 29 from the Angels, along with **Casey Kotchman**, in exchange for **Mark Teixeira**. After the trade, he made 10 relief appearances with Mississippi, going 1-2 with a save and a 3.21 ERA in 14 innings.

O'Flaherty, 23, started the season on Seattle's Opening Day roster and made seven appearances, going 0-1 with a 20.25 ERA in 6 2/3 innings. He made one relief appearance with the Double-A West Tennessee Diamond Jaxx, a scoreless two-inning outing, before making 14 relief appearances with the Triple-A Tacoma Rainiers where he was 1-0 with two saves and a 4.96 ERA in 16 1/3 innings.

SHORT HOPS

- The Braves offered free agent lefty reliever **Will Ohman** a contract Nov. 17.
- **Mike Hampton** signed a one-year contract with Astros.
- **Jorge Julio** signed a one-year deal with the Brewers.
- **Scott Thorman**, who was the Braves' Opening Day first baseman in 2007 but spent all of 2008 at Richmond, became a free agent after the season and signed a minor league contract with Milwaukee.
- **Chipper Jones** finished 12th in the MVP voting won by **Albert Pujols**.
- Japanese righthander **Junichi Tazawa** rejected the Braves' contract offer and signed with Boston.

FRANK WREN
GENERAL MANAGER

WE MAY HAVE TO ACQUIRE A TOP PITCHER IN A TRADE

JAVIER VAZQUEZ is a pitcher we've had interest in for the last six years. There are few major league pitchers who are as consistent and durable as he's been. He helps us strengthen our starting rotation, which is our main goal.

With the health situation we had a year ago, we're trying to create a roster that's as durable as possible. Vazquez helps us do that, plus he has excellent talent. He's been in the top five in the American League in strikeouts, year in and year out. That tells you he has very good stuff.

Our scouts really like Boone Logan, too, over the last year or so. Actually, he was the first piece of the deal we talked about, and then it grew to include Vazquez when we found out he was available.

The Phillies added another left-handed bat (Raul Ibanez), so left-handed pitchers are going to be important to us. Logan has a very good arm. He's big and strong and throws up to the mid-90s.

Dave Ross is a backup catcher who gives Bobby more offense. He's hit a lot of home runs the last few years, so he's got power, plus his career caught stealing percentage is in the high 30 percent range. He's a good combination of defense and power.

We tried to acquire Eric O'Flaherty at the winter meetings last year, and they (Mariners) wouldn't talk. He hurt his back lifting weights in the spring, had a tough time with it all year, and didn't get healthy until the end. We thought they were trying to sneak him through waivers, so we claimed him. He has an above-average fastball and a plus slider, which is his out pitch.

> "WE'RE TALKING TO A NUMBER OF CORNER OUTFIELDERS AND TRYING TO FIND THE BEST FIT FOR OUR CLUB."

A.J. Burnett decided to go with the Yankees. We may not be able to get the No. 1 type starter we wanted, but we're going to make sure we add more depth to the rotation. We lost Mike Hampton, but he was very straight with us that it was important for him to be close to his kids in Phoenix. In the end, that drove his decision.

There's not another top-of-the-rotation guy in the free agent market that we're interested in. There's still a possibility we will find one in the trade market. There are a couple available that could fit the bill. We'll have to see how that develops and if they're traded.

I think anyone who thought we might be dragging our feet on a Jake Peavy trade just found out that's not the case when the Padres' long talks with the Cubs fell through, too.

All these developments continue to reinforce why we believe so strongly in scouting and player development. You get into a bidding war, and you seldom win. That's why we like to develop our own. Right now we have a good wave of kids coming that we're very excited about.

Tim Hudson is doing fine in his rehabilitation, but it's still very early for him. Peter Moylan is doing very well and has been throwing in Florida for a couple of months. He's right on schedule and should be ready very near Opening Day. Rafael Soriano should be ready for spring training, too. Our bullpen should be very good.

We lost Junichi Tazawa, the young Japanese pitcher, to the Red Sox. We offered more money and a longer contract, but (Boston starter) Daisuke Matsuzaka is his idol and called him several times.

We're talking to a number of corner outfielders and trying to find the best fit for our club. As far as the outfield goes, we're open to anything that improves our club. We have three young center-field possibilities - (Josh) Anderson, (Gregor) Blanco and (Jordan) Schafer - that we're comfortable with, but we're open to anything that improves us and doesn't impede them.

GOBBLERS

ATLANTA BRAVES

Kelly and Lauren Johnson pose for a photo with mascot Homer along with (L-R) Shaquita Craft, Judy Craft and Eddie Porter.

KELLY JOHNSON and his wife, **Lauren**, went door-to-door in the neighborhood around Turner Field Nov. 20, distributing baskets filled with Thanksgiving food, including turkey, stuffing, vegetables and dessert during the Atlanta Braves Foundation's fifth annual Turkey Drop.

The Foundation also continued another holiday tradition, hosting the Hosea Feed the Hungry and Homeless Thanksgiving Dinner Nov. 27 at Turner Field. A seven-course dinner was served, and numerous services were made available to those attending the 11th annual event.

HOLIDAY CHEER

Braves players, coaches and alumni including **Tim Hudson**, **Blaine Boyer**, **Roger McDowell**, **Brian Snitker** and **Brian Jordan** spread holiday cheer at community events around Atlanta during mid-December.

McDowell, Snitker, and Jordan visited **Jim Miller** Park in Marietta Dec. 13 to distribute toys and food, pose for photos with the guests, and greet the more than 600 families and 100 volunteers gathered for the 46th annual "Cobb Christmas." The Atlanta Braves Foundation awarded a $3,000 grant to "Cobb Christmas" in 2008 for the purchase of youth sporting equipment that was donated to families in need this holiday season. Santa Claus and Braves mascot Homer also took part in the festivities.

Hudson and Boyer signed autographs and posed for photos with fans Dec. 15 at Atlantic Station to help raise funds to grant the wishes of children with life-threatening medical conditions in Georgia and Alabama. The occasion was the Make-A-Wish Foundation's annual "Stories of Light" event. For a donation of $5, fans received Hudson's and Boyer's autographs and posed for photos with the pitchers.

Hudson and his wife, **Kim**, welcomed children from the Make-A-Wish Foundation to Toys"R"Us Buckhead for a shopping spree and holiday party Dec. 18. Each child from the Make-A-Wish Foundation and their siblings received a $50 Toys"R"Us gift card, compliments of the Hudson Family. Before shopping for toys with Tim and Kim, the children enjoyed face painters and story time during a festive holiday party.

HUBBY HONORED

First base coach **Glenn Hubbard** received the 2008 **Ernie Johnson** Award in honor of his on-going support for the Hit 'Em for Hemophilia Golf Tournament and his efforts to assist Hemophilia of Georgia in raising funds to find a cure for bleeding disorders. The award was established in 2006 to honor an individual for long-standing support, leadership, and commitment to the tournament. It is named after the Braves Hall of Fame broadcaster. **Bill Acree**, the Braves' long-time travel director and equipment manager is co-chair of the event. This year's tournament at Chateau Elan raised more than $310,000 for the charity.

MAGIC FOR CHARITY

The **Cindy Donald** Dreams of Recovery Foundation, a pet project for **Bobby Cox** and former Braves coaches **Fredi Gonzalez**, now manager of the Marlins, and **Ned Yost**, will hold a Magic Show and Auction Benefit Jan. 31, at the Mountain View Community Center at 3400 Sandy Plains Rd., in the Atlanta suburb of Marietta. Cindy Donald Dreams of Recovery Foundation is a group that raises money for research into spinal cord paralysis. Visit dreamsofrecovery.org for information.

KNUCKLE BALL

The first Knuckle Ball, postponed last fall due to Hurricane Ike, is rescheduled for July 31 at Houston's Minute Maid Park. The event is hosted by the non-profit **Joe Niekro** Foundation, in honor of the former major league pitcher (1973-74 Braves), who teamed with his older brother, **Phil**, to form the winningest combination of brothers in history (539 victories). Visit joeniekrofoundation.com for information. See pages 28-30 for more on the Niekros, including **Lance**, Joe's son, who will be in minor league spring training with the Braves as a knuckleball pitcher. Joe died in 2006 of a cerebral aneurysm, and proceeds from the Knuckle Ball, which will include a reception, dinner, casino gambling, live music and live auction, go to aneurysm research.

ROCK ON

Jeff Francoeur joined with the Tumornators to present the second annual

Rock4Research benefit concert on Nov. 28 at Wild Bill's. The concert featured **Matt Moore** opening for headliner **Rhett Akins**. Francoeur, **Matt Stinchcomb** of the NFL, **Morten Anderson** and other sports stars mingled with guests at a VIP party before the event. All funds raised by The Tumornators are directly donated to The Children's Tumor Foundation that is dedicated to raising money and awareness of Neurofibromatosis and Schwannomatosis.

SPAHN GALA

Fresh off signing his huge contract with the Yankees, **CC Sabathia** will be in Oklahoma City Jan. 17 to accept his second straight **Warren Spahn** Award as the best lefthander in baseball. This is the first time the Spahn Gala will be held in Oklahoma City, and its first year of being hosted by the Bricktown Rotary Club.

The event will be at the Cox Communications Convention Center, beginning at 5:30 p.m. (Central) with a reception and followed at 7 p.m. by a formal dinner and ceremony. Visit okcspahnawards.com or call (405) 605-2375 for tickets and other information.

The Spahn Award, in its 10th year, is named after the winningest lefthander in history, who won all but the last 7 of his 363 games with the Braves. It is presented by the **Jim Thorpe** Association in conjunction with the Oklahoma Sports Hall of Fame & Museum.

BALLS & STRIKES

- The Boston chapter of the Baseball Writers Association of America will present **Jim Rice** the **Emil Fuchs** Award for long and meritorious service to baseball Jan. 8 at the Westin Waterfront Hotel. The annual award is given in honor of the former Boston Braves owner. Judge Fuchs owned and operated the Braves from 1926-35 during a colorful era of little success on the field or at the gate. Rice was a power-hitting leftfielder for the Red Sox who won the AL MVP in 1978.

- Top prospects **Jason Heyward** and **Freddie Freeman**, who starred for the Rome Braves last season, appeared in the Rome, Ga., Christmas Parade Dec. 2.

- No Brave won a Gold Glove in 2008 for the first time since 1991.

BOBBY COX

MANAGER

I'M GLAD WE'RE KEEPING OUR YOUNG PITCHERS

WE MADE OUR FIRST TRADE before we went to the Winter Meetings, getting Javier Vazquez from the White Sox to help in our rotation and also a young left-handed reliever, Boone Logan, who I don't know well but our scouts like him.

We saw Vazquez a lot when he was in the National League, and I've always liked him. He'll do fine with us. He accumulates a lot of innings, but that's not all. He accumulates wins, too. He's in the teens in wins almost every year, and you have to be pretty good to do that.

You know you're pitching well when you win like that, because hardly anyone wins 20 anymore. Everything has to go well for you to win 20 - good hitting, fielding behind you, bullpen. So, we'll be glad to take a guy who wins in the teens.

Vazquez is real solid, and Logan is a big kid that throws real well, too.

We hoped to come out of the Winter Meetings with another pitcher or two, but it looks like the Yankees have the market on that by themselves. We'd hoped to sign A.J. Burnett, but the Yankees got him. They got CC Sabathia, and they might sign Derek Lowe, too.

Another new guy we like is Eric O'Flaherty, a lefty reliever we picked up off waivers from Seattle. He had a bad back last year, but we think he's okay now. A lot of people really like him. We tried to trade for him last winter and couldn't get him, but we've got him now.

One of the most encouraging things so far this off-season was the way John Smoltz threw the other day. It was his first day throwing off the mound. He looked very good - scary good. First time off the mound, and he's throwing splits, sliders, curveballs, fastballs, and all pretty much quality stuff. It was amazing for his first time out there.

> "ONE OF THE MOST ENCOURAGING THINGS SO FAR THIS OFF-SEASON WAS THE WAY JOHN SMOLTZ THREW THE OTHER DAY."

I hope he holds it together and doesn't rush himself too much. He's got a challenge again, and that's what fires him up. It's what he needs.

And Tommy Glavine is starting to throw long toss and says he feels real good. He says he can finally sleep at night because his arm isn't killing him. I wouldn't bet against Tommy, I know that.

We'll see what happens with both of these guys, but it's real encouraging.

The other really good thing is that we've held onto our young pitchers so far and haven't traded them.

I haven't seen Tommy Hanson throw yet, but his stats are good, and everyone I've talked to - scouts, people in other organizations - they all really like him. There's no way to tell now if he'll break camp with us at the end of spring training, but we'll take a good look at him and see what happens.

Plus we've got Charlie Morton and Jo-Jo Reyes on the come, too. They've had their ups and downs, but that's the process. Smoltz and Glavine went through the same things when they were young. It doesn't come easy.

We signed Dave Ross as a backup catcher. He hit 20 home runs a couple of years ago for Cincinnati (21 in 2006 in only 247 at-bats). He's been around the league, mainly with the Dodgers and Reds, so he knows the hitters. We think he'll be a real quality backup to Brian McCann.

My knee replacements (Oct. 11 surgery) are doing good. I had to stand up a lot at the Winter Meetings. We were at the Bellagio, and there's no place to sit, except at the gaming tables. It's one big casino... So, I stood up a lot out there.

I had a real good first month of rehab. I haven't kept up with it quite as much as I should have, but I'm okay.

It won't be long before we head to Disney's Wide World of Sports in Florida to get it all started again.

PLAYING PEPPER

BRIAN McCANN

PAUL ABELL/ATLANTA BRAVES

McCann says he loves being behind the plate and hopes he can play catcher through his entire career.

INTERVIEW BY
PATTY RASMUSSEN

Q: Did you know about winning the Silver Slugger Award (voted by managers and coaches as the best hitting catcher in the National League for the second time in three years) a couple of days before the news was released (Nov. 13)?

A: Yeah, they called two days before the news came out, but they told me not to tell anyone. So, I didn't. But then on the night before it was going to be announced, I was talking to my dad, and he said, "I probably won't be able to sleep tonight thinking about the award." So, I told him, "Sleep well, Dad. I won it." It was cool. Obviously, it's something I'm proud of. I've never played for awards, but it's nice to know that people notice the numbers you put up.

Q: You've lost 20 pounds since the end of the season. What was the reason behind the desire to lose weight?

A: Well, I was pretty sore at the end of this season. I've always been heavy, and I knew that if I wanted to catch for my whole career, I'd need to lose weight and reduce the pressure on my knees. I've wanted to do this for years, but it was always so hard to stay on a diet. I'd be on it for three to five days and say, "Forget it." This year, I've been able to stick with it. I want to stay at a certain weight all season long, around 225 pounds.

Q: How do you plan to maintain the weight?

A: Losing weight and maintaining it all comes down to diet for me. We're eating a lot of chicken breasts, tuna and lean fish, which was all stuff I didn't eat much of before. I don't have a problem with working out and working hard, but I used to eat a lot of junk food. This has been the first time I've been able to pass on the "bad foods."

Q: What are the "bad foods" for you?

A: Really anything like junk food, fast food, and late-night eating. The food they set out for us after games is really good. Some of it's healthy, and some of it's not so healthy. But I'll have to pass up that bad stuff next year. I really love pizza, so one day a week - on Sunday - I'll have pizza for dinner while I'm watching football.

Q: Have you made changes to your workout routine?

A: I'm lifting weights like I did last year, with my brother Brad and Mark DeRosa. But I run three days a week on the treadmill. I usually run about 20 to 25 minutes, so it's probably about 2 miles. It gets my heart rate up and burns a lot of extra calories. I figure it can't hurt, since the more weight I take off, the less stress it puts on my knees. I'm only 24 years old, so I think I'm starting this early enough that it will impact my career.

Q: You have mentioned you want to play catcher your entire career. Why is that so important to you?

A: It's what I know. I love the position. I got to the big leagues playing catcher. To me, it's like you're in charge out there, kind of like a quarterback on a football team. You make suggestions to the pitchers about how to pitch guys, and I love that part about (the position). You're always involved in the game.

Q: Are you concerned that you don't know who your starting rotation is yet? You don't even know who you'll be catching?

A: I'm not really. I know Frank Wren is doing everything in his power to bring in some front-line talent. It would be great to get a proven guy with a strong track record. Pitching is how you win games. It's hard for our club to compete, financially, with the New York Yankees, Boston Red Sox, and Chicago Cubs of the world, but Atlanta is a great place to play, and we have the talent in our organization. We need to get a few pieces, and we'll be in the mix.

"THE DAY I WAS DRAFTED BY THE BRAVES WAS ONE OF THE HAPPIEST DAYS OF MY LIFE, AND I WANT TO BE PART OF BRINGING THOSE CHAMPIONSHIP TEAMS BACK TO ATLANTA."

Q: You're part of the core group of players the Braves are rebuilding around. Do you feel ready to be a leader of that type of team?

A: I'm definitely ready for leadership and ready to see our team succeed. I grew up in Atlanta and watched what happened for a decade and a half. I was in high school when those teams were winning. The day I

McCann, who turns 25 in February, already is a three-time NL All-Star and a two-time Silver Slugger winner, even though he's played just three full seasons in the majors.

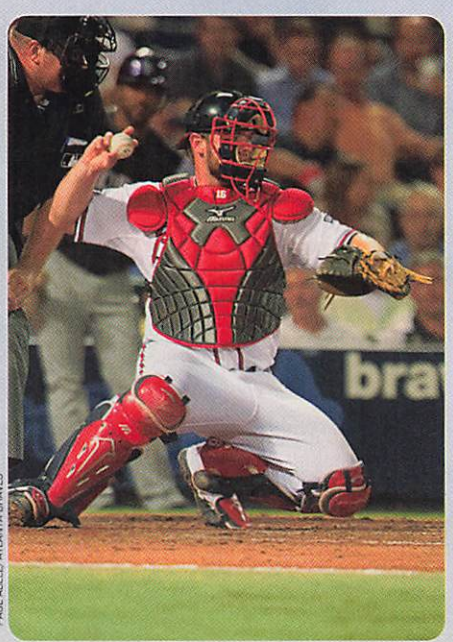
PAUL ABELL/ATLANTA BRAVES

PAUL ABELL/ATLANTA BRAVES

was drafted by the Braves (second round, 2002) was one of the happiest days of my life, and I want to be part of bringing those championship teams back to Atlanta.

Q: It looks like one of the big pieces of the Braves of the future will probably be minor league pitcher Tommy Hanson.

A: It's incredible what that guy has done this year! From what I've heard, I've not seen him pitch myself, but I hear he is the real deal. We're all excited about Tommy and the other players in the minor league system, some of them in Double-A, who may be ready to come to Atlanta pretty soon. I can't wait to get to spring training to catch Hanson and some of the other guys and see what they've got. Guys like (Hanson) don't come along every year. He throws 94-95 miles per hour and has command. That's special. He could be a future number-one starter.



PAUL ABELL/ATLANTA BRAVES

Q: Have you heard whether Hanson will come to Atlanta to throw before spring training?

A: I haven't heard that, but I know there are a lot of people who are looking forward to seeing him throw!

Q: What about your defense? What are you working on there?

A: Throwing out runners at second is the thing I'm working on the most. Getting runners out only 22 percent of the time isn't getting it done. Hopefully, what I'm doing will make me quicker and more athletic, but I'm also throwing more long toss, putting more emphasis on catching drills. No matter what you do in the off-season, though, you're never going to prepare for nine innings of baseball until you can play nine innings of baseball. It's the best preparation. So, the month and a half of spring training is where I focus on getting ready. The endurance I'm developing from running will only help.

> **"THROWING OUT RUNNERS AT SECOND IS THE THING I'M WORKING ON THE MOST. GETTING RUNNERS OUT ONLY 22 PERCENT OF THE TIME ISN'T GETTING IT DONE."**

Q: You got married in December 2007, so this past season was your first one as a married man. How did things change?

A: I think life became simpler. It's great to have someone to come home to, whether you had a good game or not. But those times when you didn't have a good game, at least you're not up all night analyzing what went wrong. If I complained, Ashley was always there to remind me that I'm living a dream. So, I'm not losing sleep over stuff, and I get to live with my best friend.

KOTCHMAN, Casey
GLAVINE, Tom
SMOLTZ, John
NORTON, Greg
DESSENS, Elmer
TAVAREZ, Julian
OHMAN, Will
JULIO, Jorge
DISABLED LIST

ROUGH INITIATION

FRANK WREN'S DEALS PROVING SOLID IN SPITE OF TUMULTUOUS FIRST SEASON AS GM

BY JON COOPER

LAST SEASON certainly didn't go the way first-year general manager Frank Wren drew it up.

No one could have foreseen the Braves losing 1,251 manpower games, which forced Bobby Cox to use 110 different starting lineups and 11 different starting pitchers. But if the true measure of a man is how he handles adversity, Wren proved to be a giant.

Through it all, he never made excuses. He simply went to work to patch together a bench, a starting rotation and a bullpen. Up came a crop of exciting rookie pitchers, including Charlie Morton and James Parr, and young outfielders Gregor Blanco, Josh Anderson (acquired by Wren in an off-season deal for reliever Oscar Villarreal), and Brandon Jones.

"I think one thing that gives us a huge advantage is we have a really good system in place and we have good scouts," said Wren. "The ability to make decisions is enhanced when you have good people around you."

Of course, Wren, who learned the system well in eight years as John Schuerholz's chief assistant, made some pretty good decisions himself. He made a big splash with his first trade, acquiring young pitcher Jair Jurrjens and minor league outfielder Gorkys Hernandez from Detroit for shortstop Edgar Renteria. A little more than a month later, he pried versatile Omar Infante and rubber-armed lefty reliever Will Ohman from the Cubs for minor league pitcher Jose Ascanio.

"I think the two primary trades we made early really helped our club," said Wren. "It put three players on our major league club and a fourth player that gives us a top prospect in the minor leagues. Then, at the first of the year, we were able to get [Mark] Kotsay to solidify our center-field situation. I think those were the deals — whether you're proud of them or not, I don't know if that's the right word — that at the end of the day helped us get where we wanted to go."

The results speak for themselves. Jurrjens led the Braves in wins (13), starts (31), innings (188 1/3) and strikeouts (139) and finished third in National League Rookie of the Year voting. Hernandez has already proved to be a blue-chip prospect, Infante started 77 games at five different positions, and Ohman, a free agent this winter, raised his stock by making a career-high 83 appearances, second-most in the league (New York's Pedro Feliciano had 86), and only one off the Braves' single-season record (set by Chris Reitsma in 2004).

The acquisitions of Jurrjens and Ohman were due in large part to Wren & Co. doing what Schuerholz calls "due diligence." In this case, it involved a team effort by Wren and John Coppolella, director of baseball administration, who is a numbers wizard hired in October 2006 by Schuerholz. Together they looked beyond the obvious statistics to find the pearl.

"The first thing we did, obviously, was we talked to their scouts and their players," recalled Coppolella. "Frank and I watched

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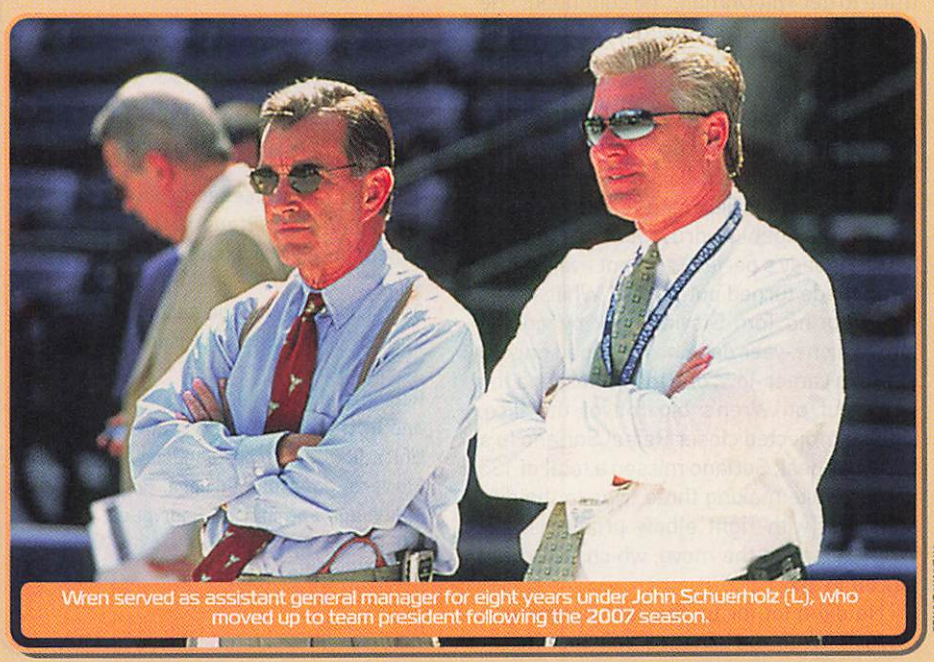
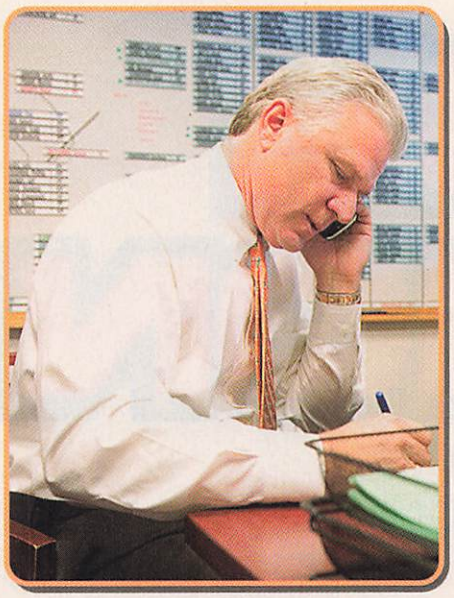


Wren served as assistant general manager for eight years under John Schuerholz (L), who moved up to team president following the 2007 season.

ALLISON SHIRREFFS

ATLANTA BRAVES



ALLISON SHAFFERS

video of Jurrjens. Then we kind of got into the stats. One of the things we did was we broke down Jurrjens' stats because he'd pitched most of [2007], in Double-A, at Erie. Erie is a really, really good hitters' park. So we checked his numbers. When we looked closer at the stats, when he was on the road, which meant in every park but Erie, he was 3-1 with a 1.85 ERA. When he was at home, he was 4-4 with a 4.22, which really stood out to us. Every player that we trade for — there's probably about 50 different parts to each formula for each player. As we looked closer at Jurrjens, we found out that he spoke four languages, that he was a great kid. On each player, on each trade, we dig very, very deep.

"The same thing when we made the trade to get Will Ohman," he continued. "He had crazy home-road splits. He just could not pitch at Wrigley Field. As we brought him here, he was great for us."

Another player who was great for the Braves was Mark Kotsay, acquired in mid-January from Oakland, who filled the gaping hole in center field caused by the departure of free agent Andruw Jones.

But nobody's perfect, and not every move Wren made turned out so rosy. While it was nice to bring Tom Glavine back by signing him to a one-year deal, he managed only 13 starts, a career-low, due to injuries, and the jury's out on Wren's big roll of the dice, signing projected closer Rafael Soriano to a two-year deal. Soriano missed a total of 135 games while making three trips to the disabled list with right elbow problems, but Wren defended the move, which still could pay off in '09.

"He did a lot for us the year before as a closer," Wren explained. "With the uncertainty of some of the guys in the bullpen and not knowing exactly when they would be returning — we felt good about Mike Gonzalez but we didn't know if we could surround him with enough pitching, especially in the bullpen, to have a formidable bullpen. We wanted to keep Soriano around a couple of years. He'd thrown well, and so buying out one year of free agency, we felt, was a good investment."

Less risky — and actually downright thrifty — was the way Wren bolstered the bench. He claimed Ruben Gotay off waivers at the end of spring training and then traded a minor league pitcher for veteran switch-hitter Greg Norton on May 5. Neither player was spectacular, yet both added depth that proved invaluable when injuries struck.

The season's biggest deal came on July 29 and involved first baseman and free-agent-to-be Mark Teixeira. Although Wren was in the unenviable position of wanting to get something for Teixeira without being low-balled, he not only refused to be fleeced but also made what might become a steal. Wren sent Teixeira to the Angels for first baseman Casey Kotchman and right-handed reliever Stephen Marek.

The deal will be better assessed down the road, after Kotchman gets a fresh start at first in 2009 and Marek, who was added to the club's 40-man roster in November, gets a chance to make the club in spring training following an excellent showing in the Arizona Fall League.

As Wren embarks on his second year on the job, he says not much has changed since the days he assisted Schuerholz... except, of course, for the weight his opinion now carries.

"When you're the assistant GM, you can

WREN'S MAJOR DEALS

2007

OCT. 29
Acquired Jair Jurrjens and outfielder Gorky Hernandez from Detroit for Edgar Renteria and cash.

NOV. 16
Acquired outfielder Josh Anderson from Houston for reliever Oscar Villarreal.

NOV. 19
Signed Tom Glavine to a one-year contract.

DEC. 4
Acquired reliever Will Ohman and infielder Omar Infante from the Cubs for righthander Jose Ascanio.

2008

JAN. 14
Acquired Mark Kotsay from Oakland for righthanders Joey Devine, Jamie Richmond and cash considerations.

MAR. 26
Acquired minor league righthander Todd Redmond from Pittsburgh for reliever Tyler Yates.

MAR. 28
Claimed Ruben Gotay off waivers from the Mets.

MAY 5
Acquired Greg Norton from Seattle for minor league lefthander Nelson Payano.

JULY 4
Optioned Jeff Francoeur to Double-A Mississippi.

JULY 7
Recalled Jeff Francoeur from Mississippi.

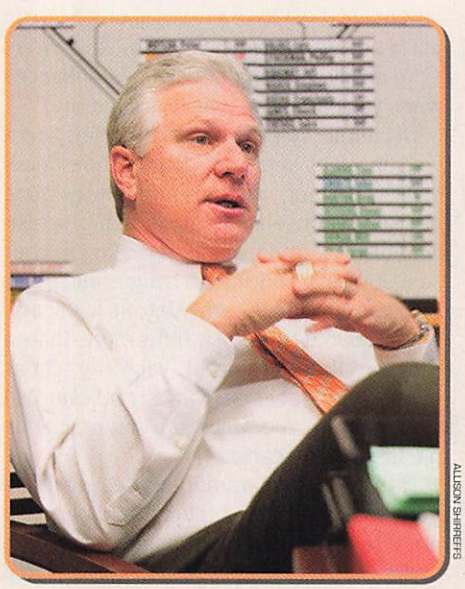
JULY 8
Signed reliever Julian Tavarez.

JULY 29
Acquired first baseman Casey Kotchman and righthander Steve Marek from the Angels for Mark Teixeira.

AUG. 27
Acquired minor league outfielder Luis Sumoza from Boston for Mark Kotsay.

DEC. 4
Acquired righthander Javier Vazquez and lefthander Boone Logan from the White Sox for minor leaguers Tyler Flowers, Jonathan Gilmore, Brent Lillibridge and Santos Rodriguez.

DEC. 5
Signed catcher David Ross.



ALLISON SHAFFERS

make a lot of suggestions," he said with a laugh. "They don't necessarily have to be followed. Once you're the general manager, once you make a suggestion, that's pretty much the way you're going. Instead of a suggestion, it's the final decision."

It's a final decision that is carefully thought out.

"His approach to making a decision [is impressive]," said assistant general manager Bruce Manno, who also assisted Wren in Baltimore during the 1999 season, Wren's one year as GM there, and was his first hire in Atlanta.

"He thinks thoroughly through decisions. He doesn't panic, he doesn't jump at something because it may look real good today, nor does he turn his back on something that may not look so good today. He'll really give thought to whatever the decision is going to be.

"He involves all of our people. He always keeps our people informed as to what's going on, he always wants their opinion," he added. "Really, when you're working in an organization, that's all you can ask, because all your people... all they want is an opportunity to contribute, to feel they're being utilized. He does a great job of pulling that all together and making sure that he asks everyone's opinion and gets their input and their thought process."

Wren's approach is not radically different from that of his predecessor, Schuerholz, which is something he promised when he was promoted to the position on Oct. 11, 2007. At the same time, Wren promised that although he had much in common with Schuerholz, he would be his own man, and Wren has stayed true to that promise.

He's been an open book from day one, and on Nov. 20, he even entered the world of cyberspace to chat on-line with the fans on atlantabraves.com.

While he admittedly enjoyed the chat, Wren shrugs off any comparisons or contrasts with Schuerholz.

"I don't want to sound like I'm doing something different or better than John," he said. "We're just different people. We have a different approach. We like the same kind of players, and we have similar feelings about running an organization. But we just have different styles. My style tends to be more toward the technological end of it, probably a little more open than John, but that's just who we are."

Having belief in his convictions has helped Wren remain true to himself, and that will be invaluable as he moves the Braves forward in 2009 and beyond.

MATT DIAZ

BEING HURT SO LONG LED TO REDEDICATION

IF THE KNEE INJURY (partial tear of the left posterior cruciate ligament sustained May 27 banging into the wall in Milwaukee trying to catch a foul ball) happened because I didn't stretch or because of something like that, it would have been a lot harder to deal with. I injured my knee by playing the only way I know how - I have to play hard.

It's the nature of the beast for me. I'm not 6-foot-4, hitting .500, and monster home runs. My gimmick is that I play hard, I play all out.

One of my favorite players to watch is Darin Erstad (Houston). He gets pretty banged up, because he plays so hard. I don't think the injury I had is going to change the way I play.

In my only game back, the last game of the season in Houston, I had a chance to make a sliding catch, but I would have to go into the wall. I didn't make the catch and I was yelling at myself all the way back into left field for not going into that wall!

I think if I tried to tiptoe around walls the rest of my career, it would be over pretty quickly. Besides, that's not how I like to play.

When I left for the off-season, I was completely finished with rehab. My legs are stronger than they were before, because of rehab. I can tell by the feel, like during agility drills, but also because I'm lifting more. I only got to play in that one game before the season ended, and I was itching to play so badly.

I took off from hitting for October and November, but I stepped up the pace of my workouts. I've done a lot of strength type conditioning, lots of lifting, a lot of plyometrics (exercises that develop quick response in muscles), and toning to create lean muscle. In fact, I think I've "leaned out" too much. I can see my chin! I'm going to try to create a little more bulk.

> "I THINK IF I TRIED TO TIPTOE AROUND WALLS THE REST OF MY CAREER, IT WOULD BE OVER PRETTY QUICKLY."

I started hitting the first week of December. I've never had any back trouble, but I've always heard that you never want to overdo in November, so my routine has always been to begin hitting the week after Thanksgiving.

I'll hit off the tee for about two weeks, then right after Christmas I'll start hitting off live pitching. There are a few community colleges where I'll work out, hitting batting practice pitches. Around the middle to the end of January, I'll go over to (Braves outfield prospect) Jordan Schaefer's batting cage, just to get some practice seeing the ball come from 60 feet.

I work out on my own most of the time, but my toughest workouts have been working out with my wife, Leslee. There's nothing like a woman who's been pregnant the better part of two years to have as a workout partner!

Having that forced time away from playing baseball gives you a lot of time to gain an appreciation for what you have.

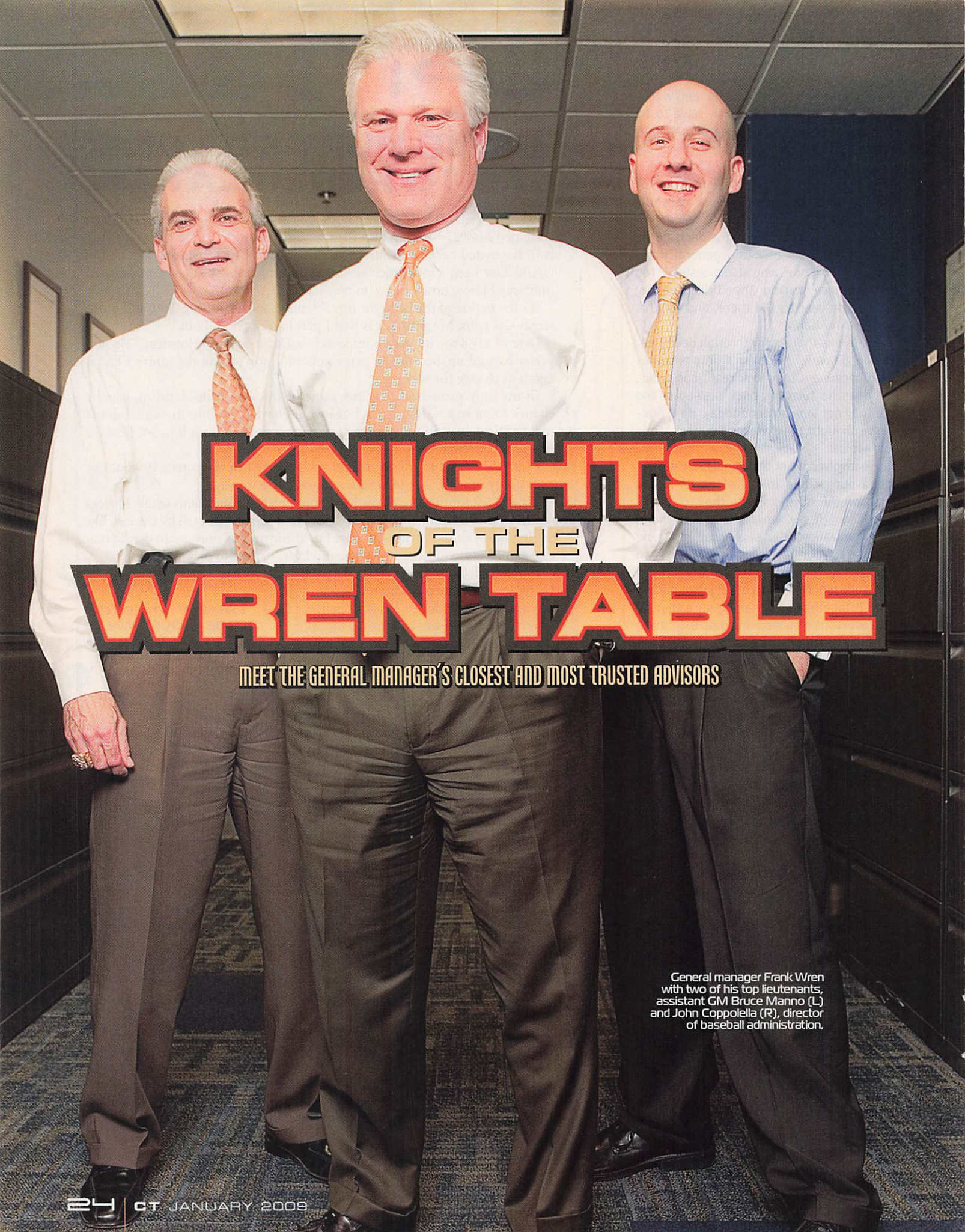
To be honest, I realized I was taking a lot of things for granted. I had been healthy for three straight years. I was running into walls, getting hit by pitches, and not missing a beat. When you get hurt, you're much more appreciative of what you've got.

I saw a lot of what my wife does, too, managing two small children. I know I changed a lot more diapers with Anna Grace (10 months old) than I did with Nathan (2)! Being around more often made me much more appreciative of my wife.

Part of baseball is the sacrifice you make to play the game. Being injured made me not only rededicate myself to the physical aspects of playing baseball, but to being a father who's there in the lives of my children.

KNIGHTS OF THE WREN TABLE

MEET THE GENERAL MANAGER'S CLOSEST AND MOST TRUSTED ADVISORS



General manager Frank Wren with two of his top lieutenants, assistant GM Bruce Manno (L) and John Coppolella (R), director of baseball administration.

BY JON COOPER

IT CAN BE LONELY AT THE TOP.

But not for general manager Frank Wren. He enjoys discussing possibilities and taking suggestions from his staff, a trusted group of assistants he consults with on a regular basis.

This "inner circle" includes assistant GM Bruce Manno, director of baseball administration John Coppolella, major league special assistant to the GM/senior advisor player personnel Jim Fregosi, and special assistants to the GM Dick Balderson, Tim Conroy, Tony DeMacio, Chuck McMichael, Dominic "Dom" Chiti and Jeff Wren.

"Especially in the general manager's chair, you have to have people that are the closest to you that you trust and you can confide in," Wren said. "Every decision you make, you're going to have 50 variations of it that you're going to be kicking around in your head. So, you have to have people that are close to you that you can bounce all the different possibilities off of to come to a final decision."

Wren's group is a diverse one. Each member brings unique talents and experience for use as his sounding board.

Here are the men whose contributions lead to Wren's final decisions.

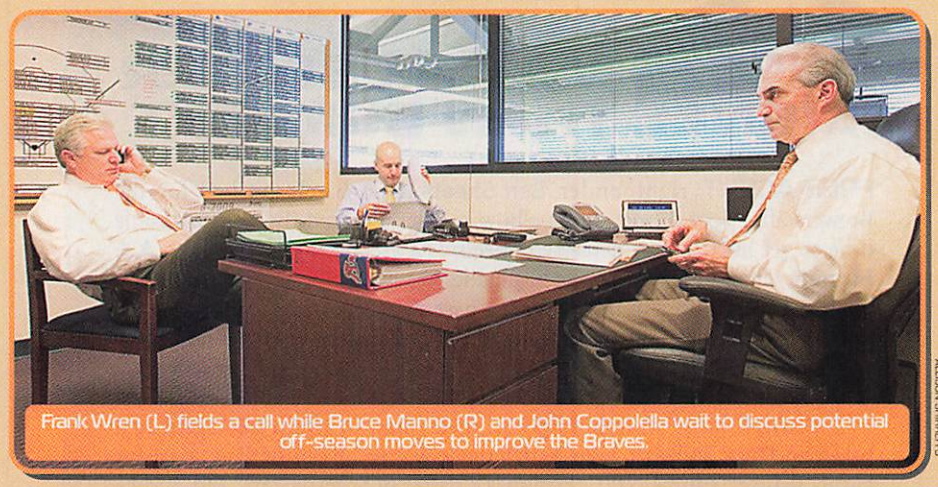
BRUCE **MANNO**

The first hire made by Wren as Braves GM, Manno has spent more than 30 years in the game at all levels of player development and scouting. He worked with the Milwaukee Brewers from 1979 to 1994, served as Wren's assistant in his one year as GM in Baltimore in 1999, and then worked with St. Louis from 2002 through 2007. He reached the role of senior director of pro scouting and special assistant to general manager Walt Jocketty before leaving the Cardinals to join the Braves.

"Bruce is so well-respected in the game. He has a great understanding of building a team, and he also has a great understanding of being part of the team," said Wren. "When you find people that you trust their ability and you trust their knowledge and trust their judgment, those are the kind of guys you want surrounding you. Bruce fits all of that."

JOHN **COPPOLELLA**

"Coppy" is a 30-year-old wunderkind, who is the numbers guru for the Braves. He turned down a lucrative job with Intel to serve as an unpaid intern with the Lake Elsinore Storm (for whom he even played "Hamlet," their mascot for a few days).



Frank Wren (L) fields a call while Bruce Manno (R) and John Coppolella wait to discuss potential off-season moves to improve the Braves.

ALLISON SHERRETS

Later an intern with the Anaheim Angels, he joined the New York Yankees and worked his way up to baseball operations assistant, eventually being promoted to assistant director of pro scouting. An October 2006 hire by John Schuerholz, Coppolella plays a key role in providing Wren with compatible players and prospects for the Braves to seek and offer in trades. His role is to be familiar with every player and every prospect on every team. He also is key in the arbitration process, doing the prep work for the Braves and Major League Baseball.

"He's really the guy that works the numbers for us and stays on top of our scouting reports," said Wren. "He's got a remarkable memory and a remarkable mind. He has a sense of the depth of every organization in baseball and who their prospects are and how they've performed. When you sit down in a meeting with him, John is a great resource. We ask him to analyze each club and their strengths and weaknesses, and when we get to a point where we're starting to talk trade, we'll go to our scouts and John has already analyzed all their reports and put them into a book format for us. We are then ready to make a deal, really at the drop of a hat, based on the information he's already compiled."

JIM **FREGOSI**

With a resume that boasts nearly half a century in the game as a player, manager and scout, Fregosi is an invaluable resource. After an 18-year career as an infielder, the six-time All-Star managed the California Angels to the franchise's first playoff berth in 1979, then won a National League pennant with the Philadelphia Phillies in 1993. He joined the Braves in November 2000 as special assistant to the GM/major league scout.

"He's the heart and soul of our scouting staff," said Wren. "He's the guy that all of our scouts love to bounce things off, because he's been in the game so long and filled so many roles. Jim is so well respected in the game and has just such great knowledge. He's another one of the guys in that inner circle that you feel like you can bounce things off at any time, and he has a wealth of knowledge to draw from to help you make the right decision."

DICK **BALDERSON**

The 2009 season will be the seventh as a special assistant to the GM/major league scout for Balderson, who has been with the Braves since being hired away from the Colorado Rockies in 1997. A former minor league pitcher in the Kansas City Royals system, Balderson has been in the game on the scouting side for more than 30 years, starting as assistant farm director for the Royals in 1976 and reaching the office of director of scouting and player development. After four years as VP of baseball operations with the Seattle Mariners, he joined the Cubs for two years as director of scouting and then VP of scouting and player development. Balderson first joined the Rockies as director of player development, ascending to VP of player personnel.

TIM **CONROY**

A former first-round draft pick of Oakland in 1973, Conroy pitched in the A's organization for eight years, and then was traded to St. Louis, where he pitched the final three years of his career. He worked for the Cards on the scouting side until 2000, when the Braves hired him. Conroy worked two years

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

ALLISON SHERRETS

BY KEN ROSENTHAL

SHEETS MAY BE BETTER SIGNEE THAN BURNETT

FREE-AGENT righthander **Ben Sheets**, who barely pitched for the Brewers after Sept. 11 due to an elbow problem, picked the worst possible time to get hurt. Teams perceived Sheets as a greater injury risk than **A.J. Burnett**, when in reality Sheets has made 30 more starts than Burnett and pitched 175 2/3 more innings over the past eight seasons. Sheets, expected to be 100 percent by spring training, drew early interest from the Rangers and Yankees.

The Angels faced an uphill fight in their quest to retain free-agent first baseman **Mark Teixeira**, whose preference was to be on the East coast for family reasons, sources said. Teixeira is a native of Severna Park, Md., a suburb of Baltimore. His wife, **Leigh**, is from Georgia and they both went to Georgia Tech, where they met. Teixeira rejected an offer from the Braves last spring.

In hindsight, the Yankees were overly criticized a year ago for failing to obtain left-hander **Johan Santana**. Rather than trade young assets such as **Phil Hughes** for Santana, they simply waited for **CC Sabathia** – who beat Santana for the 2007 American League Cy Young Award and out-pitched him in the NL last season. Meanwhile, they still have Hughes, and some of the other young players they offered for Santana brought them players in other deals.

The Indians attempted to trade for reliever **J.J. Putz**, but the Mariners wanted a highly regarded prospect in addition to outfielder **Franklin Gutierrez**. Instead, Gutierrez went to the Mets, who spun him to the M's in a three-team, 12-player deal that brought Putz to the Mets. The Mets parted with seven players, including two intriguing prospects – Triple-A first baseman **Mike Carp**, 22, and Class A righthander **Maikel Cleto**, 19, a scout's favorite who throws up to 98 mph.

Putz, who will be a setup man to Mets free agent signee **Francisco Rodriguez**, does not want to be a setup man, according to his agent, **Craig Landis**. But his change in roles could lead to him becoming a free agent one year earlier. Putz is signed for $5.5 million next season. The Mets will assume his $9.1 million club option for 2010, and that option could increase to a maximum of $9.6 million if Putz meets all of his appearance-based incentives.

Third baseman **Ty Wigginton** probably was the most surprising name on the list of players who became free agents when their teams declined to offer them contracts. Wigginton, 31, hit 23 homers in just 386 at-bats for the Astros last season. He projected to earn as much as $6 million in salary arbitration, and the Astros needed to reduce payroll.

Agents pointed to three recent free-agent contracts as proof that the market is healthy: Former Brave **Edgar Renteria**, two years, $18.5 million, Giants; former Brave **Kyle Farnsworth**, two years, $9.25 million, Royals; and **Nick Punto**, two years, $8.5 million, Twins. None of those clubs is a high-revenue franchise. None of those players will be anything close to underpaid.

- KEN ROSENTHAL IS A SENIOR WRITER FOR FOXSPORTS.COM

CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

as a national supervisor, then as a national cross checker before becoming a special assistant to the GM in 2004.

TONY **DeMACIO**

DeMacio's career has come full circle. He was hired by the Braves in 1993 as an area scout and was rehired in Dec. 2006 to his current position of special assistant to the general manager/major league scout. DeMacio also has worked for the Cleveland Indians, Chicago Cubs, Baltimore Orioles and Pittsburgh Pirates. He is credited with the Braves' signings of Tom Glavine in 1984 and Chipper Jones in 1990. He left similar marks of distinction in Cleveland, where he was instrumental in the drafting or signing of Manny Ramirez, Chad Ogea, Paul Shuey and Paul Byrd, in Chicago, where he helped bring in Kerry Wood, Corey Patterson and Jon Garland, and in Baltimore, where he signed future big leaguers Larry Bigbie, Brian Roberts, Erik Bedard, Willie Harris, Nick Markakis and John Maine.

CHUCK **McMICHAEL**

A left-handed pitcher on the 1976 University of Arizona national championship team and later in the Kansas City Royals' farm system, McMichael served in various capacities in the scouting departments of the Los Angeles Dodgers, Kansas City Royals and Texas Rangers before being hired by the Braves in September, 2000. He is credited with being a major influence in Kansas City's signing of major leaguers Mike MacFarlane, Jeff Conine and Carlos Beltran.

DOMINIC "DOM" **CHITI**

Hired by the Braves on Nov. 7, this is Chiti's second go-round with the organization. He was a left-handed pitcher drafted by the Braves in the second round in 1976. He spent 12 seasons in the Cleveland Indians chain as a coach and an advanced scout before joining the Texas Rangers organization in 2002. He was special assistant to the GM for two years, was named an advanced scout for half of 2004, then for the next year and a half provided recommendations for potential trades and free agent signings at the major league level and oversaw the organization's player development, scouting and Latin America operations. The last three seasons, Chiti served as Texas' bullpen coach.

JEFF **WREN**

Frank Wren's younger brother, Jeff, has served as a scout for the Texas Rangers and Atlanta Braves.

NEW BEGINNING

Veteran Javier Vazquez Eager To Start Over... And Over... And Over

BY JON COOPER

THE BRAVES TOOK THEIR FIRST STEP in restocking the starting rotation on Dec. 4, trading for veteran righthander Javier Vazquez from the Chicago White Sox in a six-player deal. Atlanta also acquired left-handed reliever Boone Logan, while sending catching prospect Tyler Flowers, infield prospect Brent Lillibridge, minor-league infielder Jon Gilmore and minor-league pitcher Santos Rodriguez to Chicago.

"We are on the edge of a new generation of young pitchers coming through our organization," said Frank Wren. "We need some veteran guys that can give us innings and can show them the way, and we think that's one of the things clearly Javy can do. He has the kind of character and makeup and ability to show our young guys the way and give us a chance to win every time he goes out there."

While not the ace the Braves were still seeking at press time, Vazquez is a valuable addition to the starting staff. He has earned the reputation as a horse, working at least 200 innings in eight of the last nine seasons - he threw 198 innings in 2004, the one year he didn't reach 200 - and has made at least 32 starts in 10 of his 11 pro seasons.

"It's something that I take a lot of pride in," said the 32-year-old native of Ponce, Puerto Rico, when asked about his durability. "But I also take a lot of pride in winning, so it's not all about just throwing innings. The bottom line is to win. That's what I'm here for."

Vazquez pitched with Montreal, the Yankees, and Arizona before an up-and-down three-year stint with the White Sox. He begins 2009 with a 127-129 career record, and a 4.32 ERA, and ranks 14th among active pitchers with 2,270 2/3 innings pitched and ninth among active pitchers with 2,015 strikeouts. He is the only major league pitcher to post at least 10 wins, 30 starts and 150 strikeouts in each of the last nine seasons.

But Vazquez is looking to bounce back from a disappointing 2008 season, which saw him go 12-16 with a 4.67 ERA. His 2-6 record and 5.89 ERA over his final eight starts (29 earned runs in 44 1/3 innings) led to the disintegration of his relationship with White Sox manager (and former Brave) Ozzie Guillen.

PAUL ABELL/ATLANTA BRAVES

Javier Vazquez, the only major leaguer to post at least 10 wins, 30 starts and 150 strikeouts in each of the last nine seasons, checks out his new uniform with the help of Bobby Cox and Frank Wren.

Vazquez hopes a change of scenery and of manager, from outspoken Guillen to the more supportive Bobby Cox can help him recapture his form of 2007, his best major league season, when he went 15-8, with a 3.74 ERA.

"I've known Bobby for a lot of years playing against the Braves," said Vazquez, who first met Cox in 2000 on a Major League All-Stars tour of Japan. "In professional leagues, you get a lot of negative things going on, so you always have to be positive. I'm a positive guy. I try to be positive all the time."

"I did have him in Japan," recalled Cox. "I was fortunate enough to have him and Randy Johnson and a few other guys, and Javy really stood out over there, not only as a pitcher but as a person.

"I consider Javy an elite pitcher," Cox added. "His stuff is way above average. He's a great athlete, he's a National League guy really, he holds runners extremely well at first base, and he can handle the bat."

Being back in the National League is a definite positive for Vazquez.

"It's a fresh start for me. I've always liked the National League more than the American League," said Vazquez, who has a career .211 batting average with a home run, 24 RBIs, two sacrifice flies and 74 sacrifice hits. "Being able to be part of the game and be able to do all the things, like hitting and bunting and being part of the National League game which I love, that's great."

He's been successful pitching at Turner Field, where he is 5-4 with a 3.45 ERA for his career.

"I'm a flyball pitcher, so this park fits better with the type of pitcher I am," said Vazquez, who also threw his first career 11-strikeout game at Turner Field on Sept. 10, 2000. "I'm looking forward to pitching here."

His positive feelings toward Atlanta have been bolstered by conversations with good friend, fellow Ponce native and former Braves catcher Javy Lopez.

"He was happy for me," said Vazquez. "He's always said great things about Atlanta. He still lives here, so that tells you that he loves Atlanta."

LOGAN COULD BOLSTER BULLPEN
Page 47

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

When Lance Niekro sat down last month with a contract from the Atlanta Braves, one particular section gave him pause.

"It was kind of weird," Niekro said, "putting down a 'P'."

If Niekro — the nephew of Braves legendary knuckleballer and Hall of Famer Phil Niekro and son of late Braves knuckleballer Joe Niekro — felt awkward identifying himself as a "pitcher" before he heads to minor league spring training, he had good reason. After all, he's been a hitter throughout his college and professional career. Add to that the fact that the Braves have never seen him pitch. Nor has his uncle, for that matter.

But this "P" makes perfect sense to all parties involved for a singular reason: They all believe in the power of the Niekro knuckleball. And as pitchers report to spring training, they will all be eager to see where this curious pitch lands Lance Niekro.

"I always threw a knuckleball messing around," said Lance, who will turn 30 on Jan. 28. "[Pitching] has always been in the back of my mind. I said if the opportunity came, I'd take it."

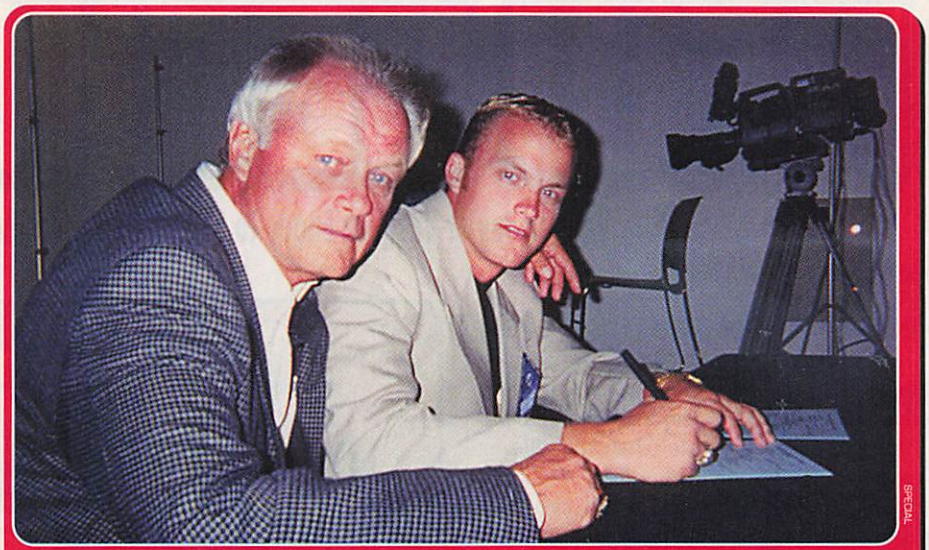
Lance was drafted by the San Francisco Giants at age 21 and began his professional career as a third baseman, but moved to first base in the minor leagues after an injury. After Joe's sudden death from a cerebral aneurysm in October 2006, Lance had trouble focusing on baseball, although he continued to play for the Giants through 2007 (and made one pitching appearance for the Fresno Grizzlies in August of that year). He had a short stint with the Houston Astros in 2008 before he was released in May and started getting back in shape mentally.

"Different people have different ways of dealing with things," he said. "For me, after my dad passed away, being back on the field wasn't something that cleared my mind. It just led me in the wrong direction. It took me a while to realize that."

Last year, Lance took a step back from baseball and started working for a friend who owns a telecommunications company. He balanced out his desk job with running and gym workouts.

"I'm probably in better shape now than ever," he said in December. "My wife keeps me on a strict and healthy diet."

Meanwhile, every time Lance talked to Phil, the possibility of him returning to baseball came up in conversation. And then, last fall, he made a decision. It wasn't overnight, it wasn't a light bulb flash, but over time, Lance made up his mind to explore the possibility of a pitching career.



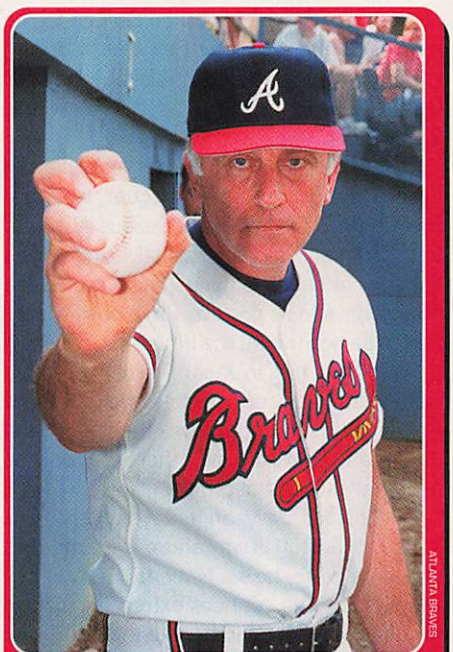
SPECIAL

Lance signs his first pro contract with the Giants in 2000 with his father, Joe, a former Brave who won 221 career games, at his side.

"I want to go out and play for myself," he said, "and for my family."

Lance got the green light from his wife, and he picked up the phone to call Phil.

"Lance called me and said, 'Uncle Phil, I have figured it out now,'" Phil said. "'I'm ready to get back, and I want to get back as a knuckleball pitcher.' I tried to get him to think about it a year ago, but he just wasn't into it. I think he was just lost without his dad. So, I was really glad to hear he's now ready."



ATLANTA BRAVES

"Knucksie" demonstrates the famous knuckleball grip that enabled him to win 318 career games and baseball immortality with a plaque at Cooperstown.

After that conversation, Phil called Braves GM Frank Wren. "He said, 'Yeah, we'll take a look. This is new to us and new to Lance, but we'll invite him to spring training.'"

Wren then called Lance and explained the situation. He invited Lance to Disney's Wide World of Sports for minor league training camp, but he stressed that nobody knew what to expect.

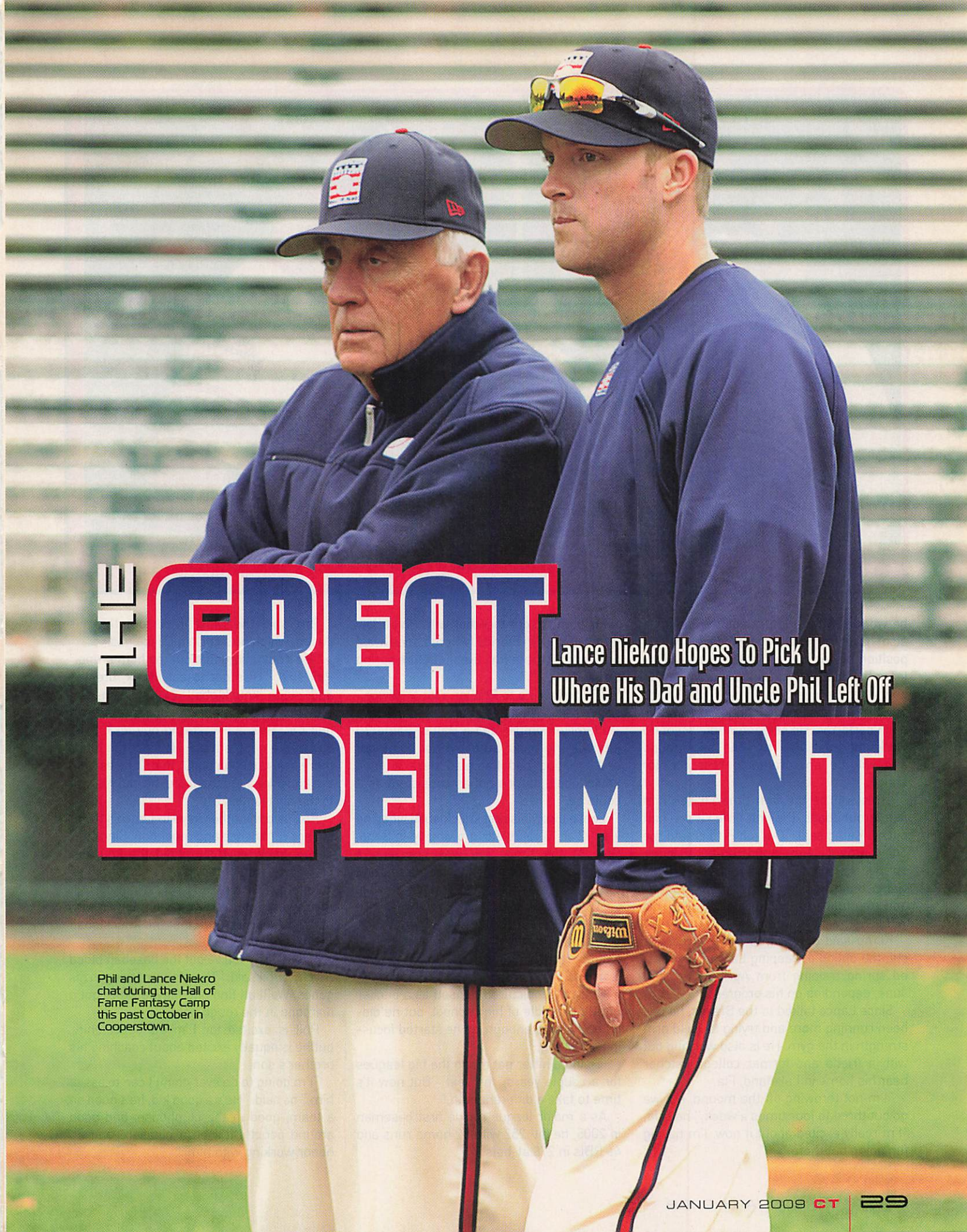
Indeed, this is new territory for everyone. While the Braves have multiple scouting reports on Lance, they're all as a position player. Not only are the Braves unfamiliar with Lance's knuckleball, they don't have anyone on staff who can coach him. But they have a commitment from Phil to work with his nephew on the pitch that has been in the Niekro family since Phil and Joe started playing backyard catch with their father. (They went on to become the winningest brother combination - 539 victories, 318 for Phil and 221 for Joe - in major league history, largely as a result of the knuckleball.)

"The learning curve will be steep, but it'll be fun because we'll all be going through it together," said Braves director of player development Kurt Kemp, who oversees all the Braves minor league teams. "We don't have a template for this, but then, neither does he."

Kemp said it's not only unusual for him to

NATIONAL BASEBALL HALL OF FAME

CONTINUED ON PAGE 30



THE GREAT EXPERIMENT

Lance Niekro Hopes To Pick Up Where His Dad and Uncle Phil Left Off

Phil and Lance Niekro chat during the Hall of Fame Fantasy Camp this past October in Cooperstown.

NATIONAL BASEBALL HALL OF FAME

The Braves have a commitment from Phil Niekro to spend plenty of quality time like this with his nephew, Lance, in an effort to develop him into a major league knuckleball pitcher.

be working with a knuckleballer, but he'll also have the challenge of developing a position player into a pitcher. They will all learn the best way for Lance to practice and how often he needs to throw. Then they'll put him on the mound and see how his pitch performs. He said the whole scenario works because Phil has the background and will be an invaluable resource for Lance.

"This will be the first time I'll see him field groundballs, the first time I'll see him pitch," Kemp said. "Our job is to create the environment and opportunity through spring training to see if this could be a viable thing to take to the minor leagues and eventually to the major leagues. This will be a maiden voyage for all of us."

Kemp said once camp breaks, there is still the option of keeping Lance in extended spring training from April 11 to early June, depending on his progress.

Since Lance talked to the Braves, he has been running more and trying to build arm strength in the gym. He is also working out with a friend and former college catcher near his home in Lakeland, Fla.

"I'm not throwing off the mound, but we go out three to four times a week," he said. "I'm really excited about it now. I'm having fun going out there."

He plans to get together with Phil a few times - either in Florida (where Lance lives) or Georgia (where Phil lives) - before spring training.

"I'll be looking to Phil for a lot of advice," Lance said. "What better teacher can I have - a family member and a Hall of Famer? I just want to make sure I'm not going out and creating bad habits. I have a good knuckleball, but it's not as consistent as it could be."

Lance threw his first knuckleball when he was 12 or 13 years old, growing up in Bend, Ore. At the time, Joe was coaching a Colorado Rockies minor league team, and Lance remembers they did a lot of throwing.

"We'd start off real soft, just throwing it up in the air," Lance said. "Gradually, over a couple weeks, he'd back up and then I would throw it harder. That's how I learned."

He says he pictured himself as a pitcher until the middle of high school, but he didn't throw hard enough, so he started focusing on hitting.

"Being a hitter got me to the big leagues for a couple years," he said. "But now it's time to take a different path."

As a major league rookie first baseman in 2005, he hit .252 with 12 home runs and 46 RBIs in 278 at-bats.

Phil said the most important thing is desire, which he's certain Lance has.

"He's got to forget about the home runs," Phil said. "He's got to eat, drink, breathe and sleep knuckleball 24 hours a day. Whether he can make an adjustment, we'll find out. He's a big, strong guy (6-3, 210), and he's a good athlete. He's got the tools, there's no question about that. If he can get the knuckleball to the plate, he can make it to the big leagues."

Phil said the other keys to Lance's training are confidence and repetition. Since few people know anything about the knuckleball, there aren't many places Lance will be able to go for help. Phil said it's important that he become his own coach. Either way, the two Niekros agree that the knuckleball talent is genetic.

"I told him, 'You've got the baseball blood in you,'" Phil said. "There's something in his genes. We'll all find out. Maybe we've got a diamond in the rough here."

Phil is excited for Lance's opportunity, but he is equally excited about coaching his brother's son.

"I'm going to do everything I can to assist him," he said. "He's a good kid, he's good on a team, good in the clubhouse, and good around people. It'll be a pleasure and an honor working with him."

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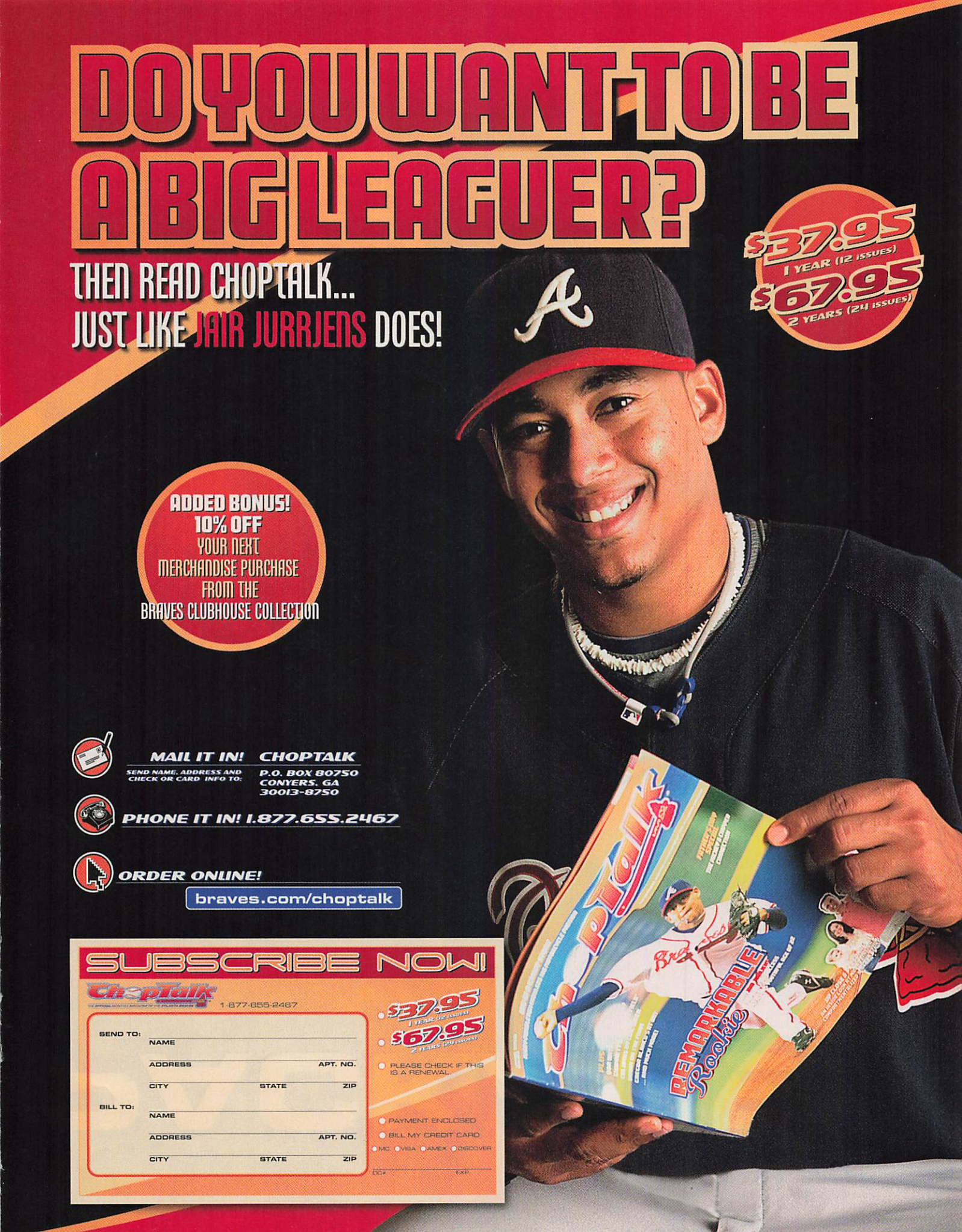

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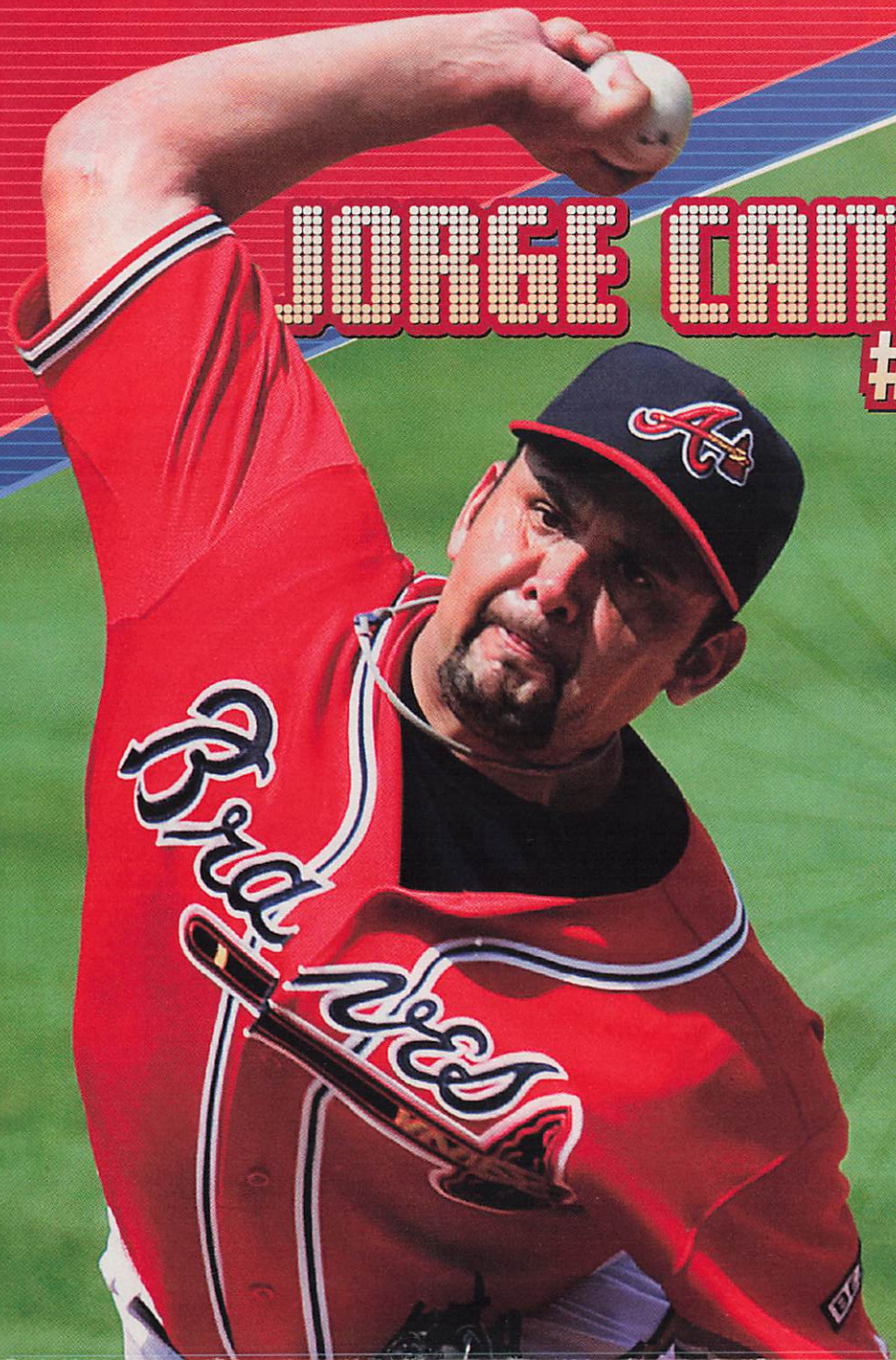
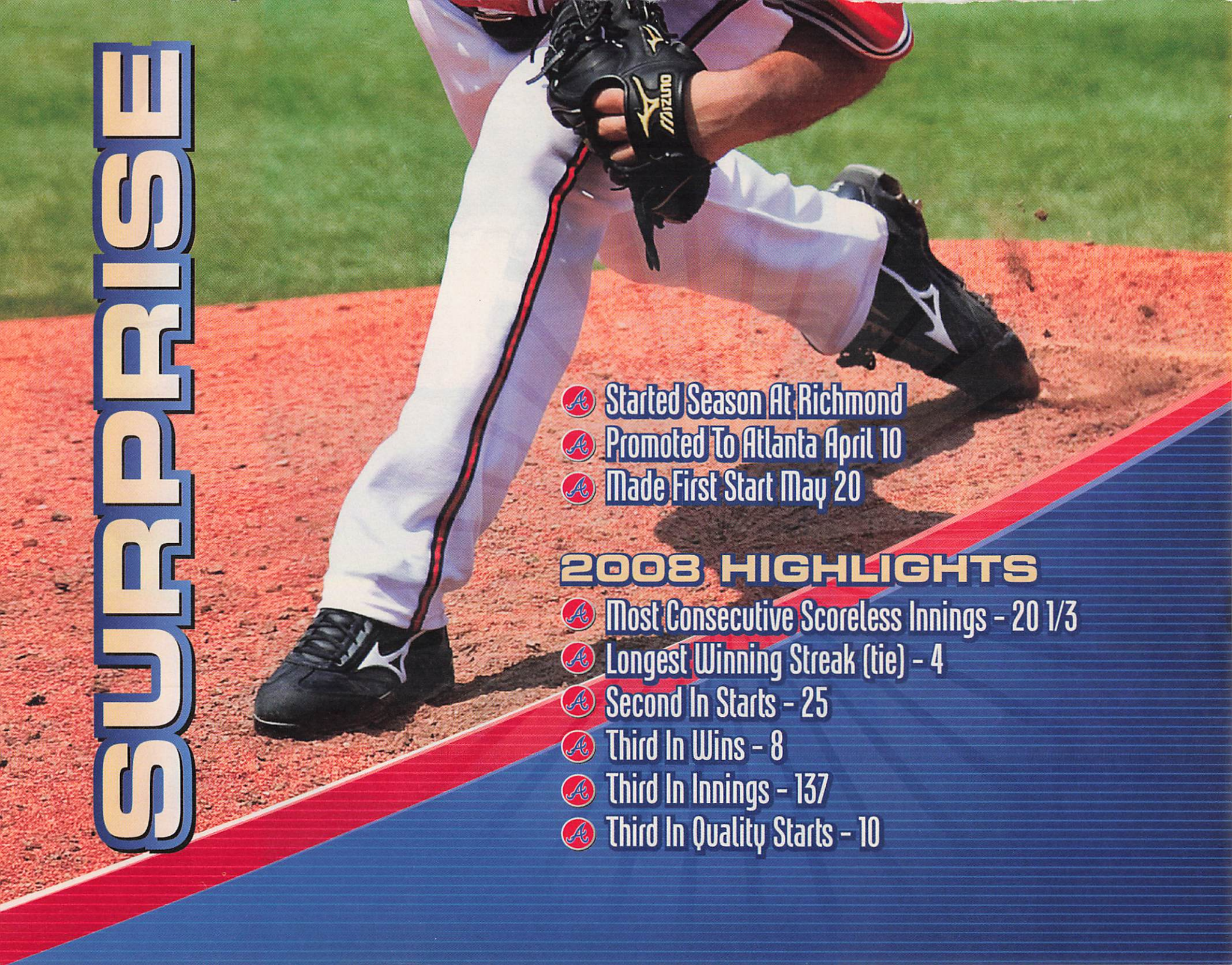


THE BIG SHOT


SURPRISE
Started Season At Richmond
Promoted To Atlanta April 10
Made First Start May 20
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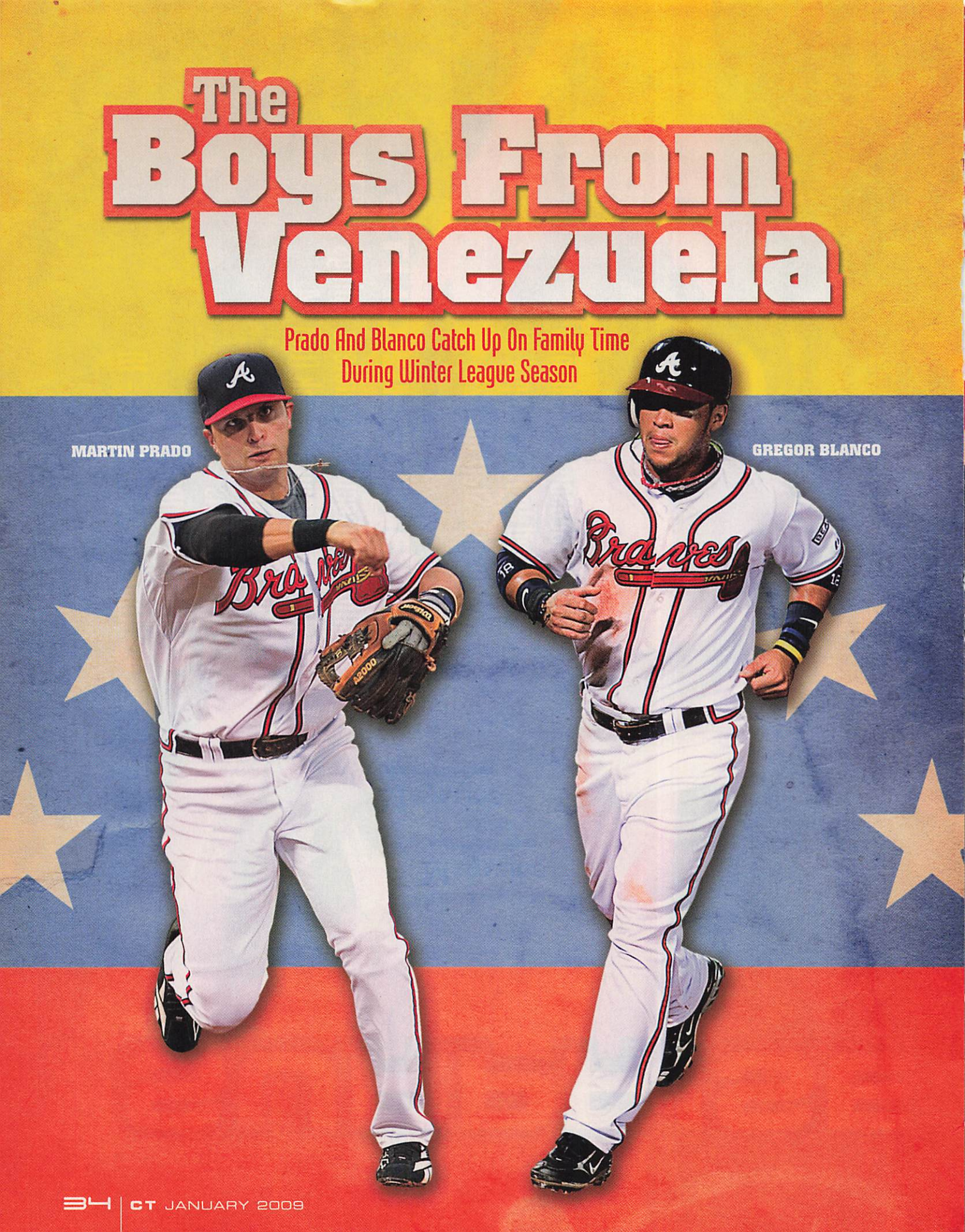
Longest Winning Streak (tie) - 4
Second In Starts - 25
Third In Wins - 8
Third In Innings - 137
Third In Quality Starts - 10

The Boys From Venezuela

Prado And Blanco Catch Up On Family Time During Winter League Season



BY JOSÉ OROZCO

When toiling in a strange land that's an ocean away from home, Gregor Blanco and Martin Prado are like family. The young Braves from Venezuela, who shared an apartment last season in Atlanta's Atlantic Station area, keep each other connected to their far-flung homeland during the long and oft-lonely major league season.

If a 162-game season, with all its travel and varied demands, is hard on anyone, it may be harder on young men who leave behind intensely close-knit families. Typical for Venezuela, Prado has a 40-year-old sister, Yaidhyt, still living at the family home in Maracay with her two children, while Gregor's twin brother, Gregory, still lives at the Blanco home in Cua, outside Caracas.

During the winter league season, Prado lives at home when he plays for the Aragua Tigers, while Blanco goes back and forth between a Caracas hotel and his Cua home when playing for the La Guaira Sharks.

Apart from living in tight quarters for decades, the closeness of these families comes from time and emotional commitments.

The Blancos and Prados eagerly supported their children in baseball, even taking their respective clans to out-of-state games. When Prado once went to play a game in Ciudad Bolivar, on the opposite side of the country from Maracay, Irma de Prado told her son that she would find her way there. Prado still remembers turning to see his mom in the stands.

THE LAST-CHANCE KID

Sitting in the family home in Maracay's La Candelaria neighborhood, a quiet area of low-flung and modest single-family homes, Martin Prado, 25, seems gentle alongside his mother's toughness. When her children were growing up, de Prado, a single mother, was known for taking extreme measures to keep them in line.

After a 14-year-old Martin lingered one night at a party where he'd been playing drums used in Venezuelan music, his mother showed up unannounced and dragged him away. "That's why my children are good people," said de Prado.

"Here comes Irma!" became a common refrain among Prado's friends.

Along with Yaidhyt, 40, Martin's siblings include Pedro, 37, who lives with his wife and children, and Emerson, 35, who still lives at home.

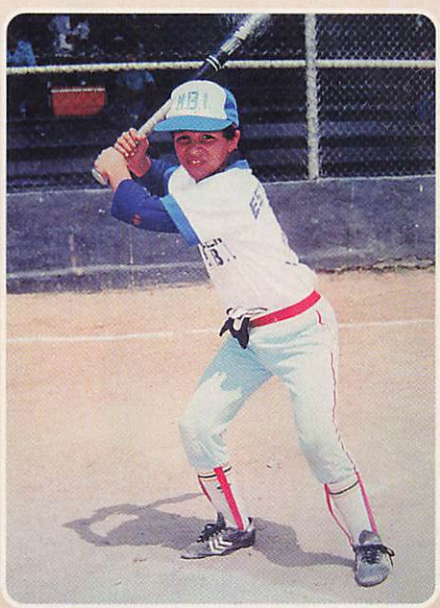
The cosmos seemed to conspire with de Prado to show her future ballplayer son the error of his youthful ways. Playing frisbee, which de Prado feared would hurt the arm of her son, who was a pitcher then, Martin injured his leg instead, missing a baseball trip to Mexico the next day.

JUAN CARLOS LAGORIO

Martin Prado (R), whose .320 batting average was second on the Braves last year to Chipper Jones, is home for Christmas with (L-R) brother Emerson, sister Yaidhyt, and mother Irma de Prado.

One particular incident ranks among Prado's most embarrassing experiences as a youngster. Sent to play center field, a bored young Martin would cross his arms and daydream.

"I didn't like center field, because the kids never hit the ball there," Prado said.



SPECIAL

Young Martin was worried he wouldn't be able to hit, because he started as a pitcher, but he soon proved himself with the bat, too.

One day, he was daydreaming again when a shout woke him from his distracted state.

"Stop picking your nose, boy!"

His mother had come over to loudly and publicly chastise him. A suddenly smaller Prado shouted back, "Mom, don't yell at me like that!"

But Prado's mother was just as supportive as she was tough. She also fixed her son's spikes and sewed his baseball pants when the family couldn't afford new equipment. (Martin now gives shoes and batting gloves to area kids.) De Prado treasures her son's neat first-grade notebook, which Martin's teacher kept for five years to show students how to correctly perform exercises.

"She had never had a student like him, who did things as they were supposed to be done," de Prado said. "That's the way he was, even in baseball."

Prado's discipline would later pay off. A pitcher in the Mario Briceño league, where he had played since he was six years old, Martin hardly knew how to swing a bat when at 13 he left to play for the municipal league's powerful Devils team. His new manager moved him to third base.

"I didn't know if I could bat," Prado said.

As the new kid, Prado also had to try fitting in among a tight group of all-star players. Not knowing how to hit didn't make the task any easier.

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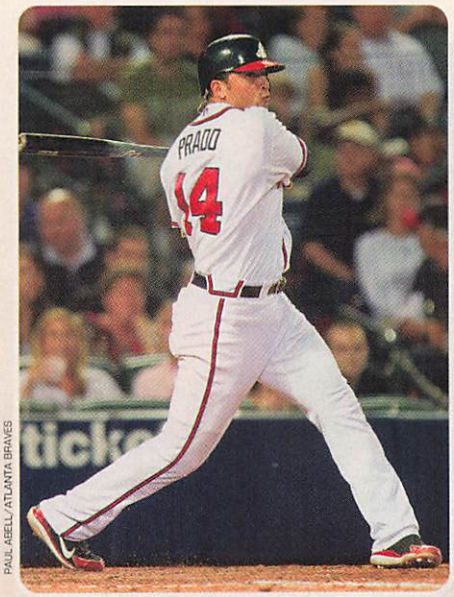
PHOTOS: PAUL ABELL/ATLANTA BRAVES



PAUL ABELL/ATLANTA BRAVES

Prado started games at five positions last year and finished fourth on the team in both on-base percentage (.371) and slugging percentage (.461).

"The Devils were a tight team and a winning machine," said Prado. "It took me one-and-a-half years to fit in and two years to reach their level."

Prado's bat caught up to his peers when he hit a game-tying triple to clear the bases in a playoff game the Devils trailed in, 8-0. They went on to win the game and the championship.

"After that, I had the respect of my peers," said Prado, who needs make no apologies for his bat now, since his .320 average last season ranked second on the Braves to NL batting champ Chipper Jones.

Despite his rise through the Devils, Prado wasn't dead set on becoming a professional ballplayer. He enrolled in a local university's mechanical engineering department, hoping to play ball as he studied. Convinced that Prado had the stuff of a pro, Felix Delgado, a long-time Cincinnati Reds scout, persuaded the budding engineer to devote three months to baseball training, followed by a series of tryouts.

Offered a $1,500 signing bonus by the Reds, Prado decided he was better off in school. But Delgado would call again.

"There's an Atlanta tryout, your last tryout," said Delgado. "Let's give it another go."

Scheduled for a 9 a.m. tryout, Prado woke up at 8, leaving home at 8:30 for the local bus station. He lost time waiting for the bus to fill up, leaving at 9:10 a.m. and finally arriving at the tryout at 9:45.

"We were waiting for you," said Braves scout Julian Perez.

Another player asked, "What's this guy doing arriving at this hour?"

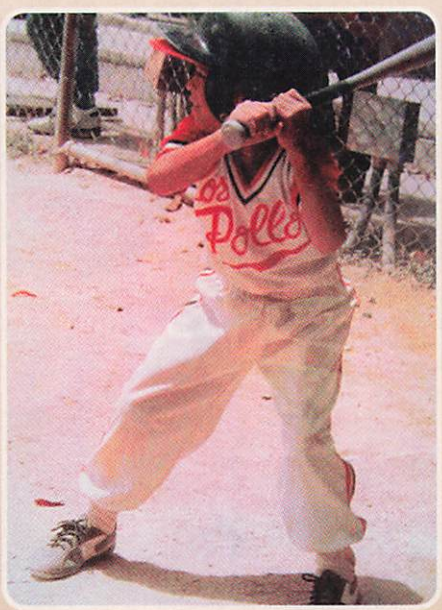
Feeling calm, under no pressure and with no expectations, Prado hit the ball out of the small stadium, ran 60 yards in 6.7 seconds, and swallowed up grounders. After the tryout, the scouts took him to McDonald's for lunch, a rare treat for Prado, and they told him they wanted to sign him. They drove him home, sitting down with the family and finally agreeing to a $5,500 signing bonus in February 2001.

From engineering student to a young professional ballplayer known for a strong bat and versatility, Prado owes his career to Delgado's call from out of the blue. Adding to the fateful circumstances, Prado, who started games at five positions last season, later learned that the reason the Braves were signing anyone at all was because their Dominican Republic team had to fill a single open spot.

THE SOLITARY TWIN

Coming from a sports-crazed family, Gregor Blanco, 25, started playing organized baseball at age 4. His father, Hernan Blanco, played baseball in the Venezuelan minor leagues, losing interest in it when he fell in love with Rosa Peraza, a softball player, at the tender age of 14. One of Blanco's uncles played baseball with major league shortstop great Omar Vizquel and spent a career in the Venezuelan basketball league.

Despite the Blanco pedigree, the family never pressured young Gregor, and twin brother Gregory, to perform well. Their brother, Gregsman, 17, is a prospect currently preparing for his own tryouts. The Blancos grew up with a cousin, Edward Peraza, 28.



SPECIAL

As a youngster, Blanco sometimes slept in his baseball uniform, but his mother drew the line when he wanted to sleep with his bat.

Baseball for the Blancos was an excuse to spend time together.

"The family liked being with us," said Blanco before a winter league game at University Stadium in Caracas. "We'd play baseball on vacations, no beach, just baseball."

"My mom motivated us to be the best in baseball and everything, so that everyone would see us as an example."

Blanco's mother, Rosa Peraza, died of brain cancer three years ago at 44 years of age. Even though Peraza and her husband never planned for any of their sons to play major league baseball, one of them was firmly on that road.

His mother would warn Blanco not to sleep with his baseball bat, calling it "unhygienic." Kelly Villalta, who has known Blanco since the age of 5, remembers Blanco sleeping in his uniform, though.

"I'd tell my mom, 'One day, I'm going to be a big leaguer and make you proud,'" said Blanco, who finally reached his goal last season when he hit .251 in 144 games as a rookie outfielder. "She never got to see me, but I know that she is proud of me wherever she is."

From the start, the Blanco twins were friendly baseball rivals. The twins competed against each other outside of games, challenging each other to foot races and hitting contests.

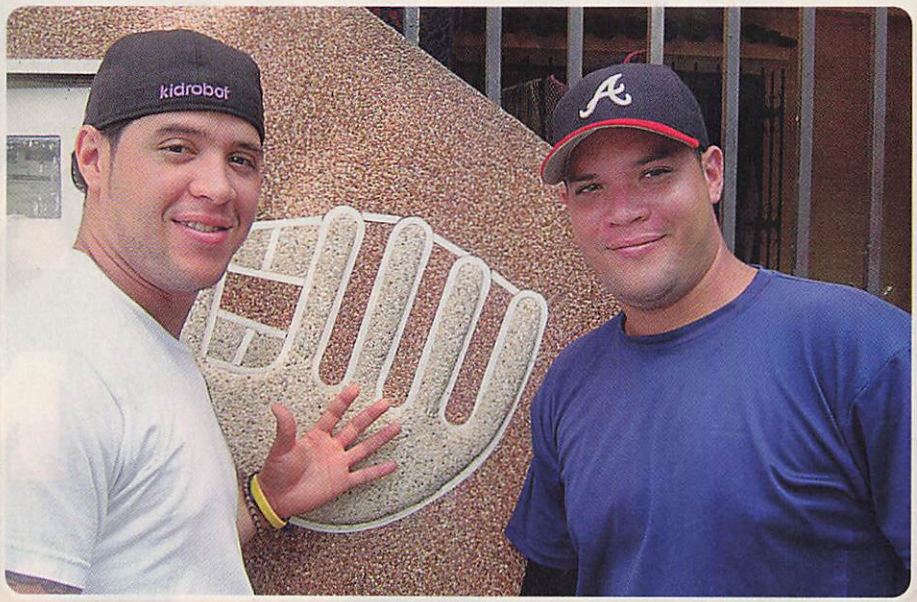
"The little twins caught everyone's eye," said Villalta, the childhood friend. "They ran very hard and were always competing. It was a joy to see them run. It wasn't natural for anyone to run that hard."

The Blancos' neighborhood friends, some of whom play professional baseball in Europe, would gather at the Blanco home to play video games or cross the street to a field to play any of a number of sports.

Gregory, who played catcher, was the better player for a long time without trying much, he says. But that changed after an incident that shook young Gregor and seemed to challenge his baseball dreams.

Forced to choose between the Blanco twins for the state team, coaches chose Gregory, throwing Gregor into spasms of regret and dismay. Gregory remembers his twin crying for three hours. The brothers had hoped to play together on the state team.

"My brother was better than me," said Gregor, who made more starts in left field



JUAN CARLOS LAGORIO

PAUL ABELL/ATLANTA BRAVES

Gregor (L) and his twin brother, Gregory, pose at the facade of the family home that is decorated with a baseball and bat, as well as this glove. As a rookie last year, Gregor started more games in left field (55) than any other Brave.

last year (55) than any other Brave. "I vowed to improve so that I would make it to where I wanted to go."

Riding his bicycle or rollerblading, Blanco went alone to the Baudilio Diaz stadium, named after the only other pro ballplayer from Cua, four and a half miles away to practice every night. He'd toss balls high in the air to work on flyballs, run, even practice sliding into bases. (Blanco also credits "Mister Rodolfo," who trained him from ages five to 15, for helping him reach the major leagues.)

"It helped me a lot," said Blanco, referring to his solitary regimen.

His twin brother and friends thought he was crazy.

"He did things no one else did," said Gregory, who now works as a physical education teacher. "No one plays baseball by themselves. Unless you're wrong in the head."

More than its physical benefits, Blanco's solitary regimen mentally prepared him for the loneliness Latin American players sometimes experience playing minor league baseball in the U.S.

Speaking almost no English, Blanco once ordered a pizza he didn't want, but not knowing how to order correctly, he took a few bites before disposing of it. The struggle to perform mundane tasks such as ordering food at a restaurant emphasized Blanco's loneliness.

Twin brother Gregory couldn't take the loneliness when he played minor league ball in the Angels farm system. He eventually returned home to be with his mother, who was ill.

"Gregor is a loner," said Gregory, who attributes part of his twin's success to his mental focus. "If he had seen my mother at that time, he wouldn't have developed as he did."

For Blanco, moving to the U.S meant entering a strange new world where no friends or family were waiting – where even ordering a pizza became a challenge. While American ballplayers may have family nearby or at least speak the language and can socialize freely, Latin American players are completely alone.

JUAN CARLOS LAGORIO

Gregor Blanco with family (his father, Hernan is first on the right, and his brother, Gregsman, is in front, holding the small child) and friends in a field across the street from his home where he played baseball as a youth.

"It's really hard to go to another country," said Blanco, "with no support network."

Blanco saw his family for two days in Venezuela during last season's All-Star break, what he describes as a frustratingly short visit. Now divorced, he saw his three-year-old son, Grenyer, only briefly.

"Being a ballplayer, you have to forget everything," said Blanco, who led the Braves in steals (13) last year and was second in walks (74). "Mentally, you have to be very strong."

During the season, Blanco yearns to be back home, hitting bottle caps with a stick, a treasured pastime among poor children in Venezuela.

"It gets to me, and I wish I were here rather than alone over there," he said.

For many players, their lives seem split between a happy childhood playing baseball for fun and their well-paid, but more tense, adult jobs playing professional baseball. Blanco, for one, also feels the tug of family and home in a far-away place.

Coming from a similarly tight family, Prado also feels home's powerful draw. Though he also enjoys traveling to new cities – he loves San Diego – and the relative safety in the U.S, he depends on the support of Blanco and other Venezuelans when the season seems like it may never end.

"When you are thinking, 'Still three months to go before I return home,' you get mentally blocked," said Prado. "We tell each other, 'Don't worry, the time will pass quickly.'"

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April 2005	Starting Rotation
May 2005	Andruw Jones
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July 2005	Kyle Davies
August 2005	Johnson & Langerhans
September 2005	Jeff Francoeur
October 2005	Andruw Jones
November 2005	Brian McCann
December 2005	Andruw Jones
January 2006	Edgar Renteria
February 2006	Niekro, Aaron, Lemaster
March 2006	LaRoche Family
April 2006	Andruw, Smoltz, Chipper
May 2006	Chris Reitsma
June 2006	Francoeur's Slam

July 2006	Edgar Renteria
August 2006	Brian McCann
September 2006	Bob Wickman
October 2006	John Smoltz
November 2006	Bobby Cox
December 2006	Jeff Francoeur
January 2007	Rafael Soriano
February 2007	Spring Training
March 2007	Mike Gonzalez
April 2007	Andruw Jones (Sold Out)
May 2007	Hubbard & Johnson (Sold Out)
June 2007	John Smoltz
July 2007	Diaz & Harris
August 2007	Edgar Renteria
September 2007	Mark Teixeira

October 2007	Jeff Francoeur
November 2007	Chipper Jones
December 2007	John Smoltz
January 2008	Tom Glavine
February 2008	Tim Hudson
March 2008	Mark Kotsay
April 2008	Teixeira & Jones
May 2008	Brian McCann
June 2008	Jair Jurrjens
July 2008	Chipper Jones
August 2008	McCann & Jones
September 2008	Skip Caray
October 2008	Brian McCann
November 2008	Chipper Jones
December 2008	Pete Van Wieren

THE FIVE MOST UNDERRATED PLAYERS

BY STEVE FALL

WHILE NOT CONSIDERED superstars, the following five players delivered strong performances during their stays in Atlanta. A closer look at their statistics reveals how much they helped the club.

Ryan Klesko's numbers never opened many eyes, mainly because getting platooned limited his plate appearances and chance to post big home run and RBI figures. But he had phenomenal qualitative power statistics, among the best in Atlanta Braves history.

Klesko hit 30.1 home runs per 600 plate appearances as a Brave. That trails only Hank Aaron (38.4), Bob Horner (32.5) and Andruw Jones (30.4) in team history (among players with 1,500 plate appearances). Because he often sat against left-handed starters, few thought of Klesko as a 30-homer hitter. In 1996, his only year in Atlanta with at least 600 plate appearances, the burly slugger hit 34 homers and drove in 93 runs.

Since the Braves came to Atlanta in 1966, Klesko places fourth with 97.4 RBIs per 600 plate appearances. Only Aaron (102.8), Fred McGriff (98.9) and Horner (98.6) lead him. Klesko also ranks third in both slugging percentage (.525) and on-base plus slugging percentage (.886). In both categories, he trails only Aaron and Chipper Jones.

Klesko came up as a first baseman, but never saw significant action there until his final Braves season (1999). While the numbers show he lacked range in left field, Klesko performed well enough with the glove to hold down the position. That enabled Bobby Cox to get another big bat in the lineup at first base, such as McGriff or Andres Galarraga.

ANDY LYONS/ALLSPORT

Ryan Klesko ranks fourth in Atlanta history in both home run and RBI frequency and third in slugging percentage.

Darrell Evans provided plenty of offense despite hitting just .246 as a Brave. Evans, who primarily played third base for Atlanta, combined power with a tremendous batting eye. Unfortunately for him, few realized the value of high walk totals when he played in the 1970s and 1980s.

In 1973, Evans hit 41 home runs and drew 124 walks. He and Chipper Jones (1999) remain the only two Braves to hit 40 homers and walk 120 times in a season. Evans also drove in 104 runs and scored 114 in 1973, joining Aaron (1970) as the only two Braves to reach 100 runs and 100 RBIs in any season during the 1970s.

Evans, who had an excellent .368 on-base percentage and 131 home runs in a Braves uniform, ended his career with 414 homers and a .248 batting average. That marks the second-lowest batting average by a 400-home run hitter (Dave Kingman, .236).

Jeff Blauser played a significant role during the Braves' first several division championships. He owns the highest career on-base plus slugging percentage (.777) by any Atlanta Braves shortstop with 2,000 plate appearances. He also produced six double-digit home run seasons at that position, twice as many as the next closest shortstop in team history (Rafael Furcal).

Blauser, who also spent time at third base and second, usually posted range factors below the league average at shortstop. But his hitting more than offset that, especially during superb 1993 and 1997 seasons when he made the NL All-Star Team.

Cecil Upshaw, a 6-6 submarine-style relief pitcher, ranked eighth in the majors with 70 saves from 1968-72 despite missing the entire 1970 season with an injured finger. Upshaw's 3.01 ERA while pitching for the Braves trails only Greg Maddux (2.63), Mike Remlinger (2.74) and Greg McMichael (2.96) in team history (minimum: 300 innings).

Upshaw pitched long before closers worked one inning to earn a save. In 1969, when just four NL relievers had 20 or more saves, he tied for second place with 27. His saves averaged 1.9 innings apiece and seven times he notched saves of three innings or more that year. His performance helped the Braves capture the NL West division title.

Upshaw had three different relief outings with the Braves when he threw seven or more shutout innings. All other pitchers in team history combined to do this once (Rick Mahler in 1988). In a 1968 game versus the Mets, Upshaw entered with two men on and nobody out in the first inning. He then shut out New York for nine full innings in a 4-2 Braves victory.

Gene Garber pitched as well as Upshaw for the Braves, and sustained his success longer. The side-arming reliever ranked eighth in the majors with 152 saves during the decade he spent in Atlanta (1978-87). Since the team had a winning record just three times in that time frame, there weren't that many save opportunities. Garber still became the first pitcher in franchise history to save 30 games in a season. That came when the Braves won the 1982 NL West division title.

Garber had the best control of any reliever in team history. He allowed just 1.58 unintentional walks per 9 innings, third best among pitchers with 300 innings. He trailed only starters Greg Maddux (1.07) and Ken Johnson (1.42).

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NOT SO FAST

Impressive Smoltz Showing Signs That Retirement Isn't Imminent

BY MARK BOWMAN OF MLB.COM

Last July, Smoltz was playing with tee-ballers on the South Lawn of the White House, but he's looking like he could be pitching again this summer.

ZUMA WIRE WEST PHOTOS

WHENEVER THE BRAVES have discussed their projected rotation for the upcoming season, they've never forgotten the fact that it could include both John Smoltz and Tom Glavine.

In fact, it's probably more accurate to say Atlanta's brass is hoping that both of these organizational icons prove healthy enough to spend at least one more season together with the Braves.

Coming off their respective season-ending surgeries, Smoltz and Glavine have both provided indication that they are looking forward to pitching again.

While Glavine just started playing catch the first week of December, Smoltz has been throwing since early November, and on Dec. 5, he threw off a mound under the watchful eyes of Bobby Cox and pitching coach Roger McDowell.

"John Smoltz was just outstanding today," Cox said. "He threw fastballs, breaking balls (split-finger fastballs) and changeups. If I was rating him on a scale of 1-10, I'd say he was a 6.5. He was really good."

Blaine Boyer, who has been working out with Smoltz throughout the off-season, was equally impressed with the performance Smoltz provided while throwing off a mound for the first time since undergoing major shoulder surgery in June.

"The ball is just exploding out of his hand, and it's just unbelievable, because he's not even six months removed from his surgery," Boyer said. "It's absurd to see how good he's throwing right now."

After performing the shoulder surgery, noted surgeon Dr. James Andrews informed Smoltz, who will be 42 on May 15, and the Braves that he had to repair significant damage. Consequently, the veteran pitcher was forced to spend a few weeks wondering if he'd pitch again.

But less than two months later, Smoltz, who appeared in just 6 games last season (3-2, 2.57), was enjoying pain-free rounds of golf and planning to pitch again. It's unknown whether he has regained all of the strength in his shoulder. But he was definitely encouraged after throwing a football 55 yards a few weeks ago.

"He's building his arm and his stamina," Cox said. "His arm is perfectly sound as we speak. Hopefully it stays that way. He's really of the mind-set to pitch and win. It went great today."

It will be another few weeks before Glavine, who will be 43 on Mar. 25, can begin throwing off a mound. But for now, he's at least encouraged by the fact that everything seems sound with his left shoulder and left elbow, which were both repaired during a season-ending surgical procedure in August.

Providing more encouragement for Glavine was the fact that he didn't feel any discomfort while completing three sets of 25 throws from a distance of 45 feet the first week of December.

"Everything felt good," said Glavine, who had never been on the disabled list before making three trips there this past season.

While the Braves don't want to make Smoltz and Glavine feel like they're being taken for granted, they also aren't in a position where they can responsibly guarantee them a contract right now.

This stance could certainly change once Smoltz and Glavine provide more reason to believe that they are physically sound enough to pitch again.

Glavine, who returned to the Braves in 2008 after spending the previous five seasons with the Mets, doesn't want to relive the frustrations that were present this past season, when he was pain-free for just three of his 13 starts (2-4, 5.54).

But more importantly, he wants to see his storied career have a much happier ending.

"I don't want to go through what I did last year," Glavine said. "But at the same time, you don't want to end your career with a season like that."

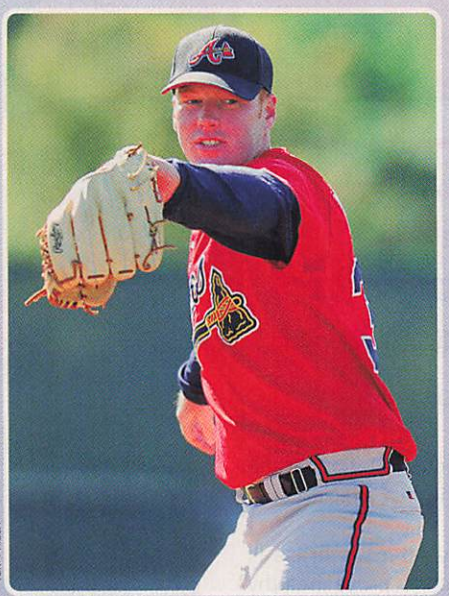
BY BILL BALLEW

HANSON'S BIG SEASON CONTINUES WITH MVP AWARD IN FALL LEAGUE

THE ACCOLADES continue to accumulate for Tommy Hanson. After putting together the best all-around season by any Braves' minor league pitcher in 2008, the righthander dominated the Arizona Fall League. As a result, he was named the recipient of the league's Joe Black Most Valuable Player Award, becoming the first pitcher ever to win the honor in the prestigious league.

"Being the first pitcher to win the award is a pretty special thing," said Hanson, who received the award during the Winter Meetings in Las Vegas. "There were a lot of other players who could have easily received the award, and to be recognized among such a strong group of guys is pretty special."

Ranked as the second-best prospect in the AFL by Baseball America magazine, Hanson led the league with five wins, an 0.63 ERA and 49 strikeouts, and limited opposing hitters to a .105 batting average. He also threw three hitless innings in the Rising Stars Showcase and five solid innings in the AFL championship game for Mesa.



TOM PRIDDY

The first pitcher to be named MVP of the Arizona Fall League, Tommy Hanson is bound to get a good look in spring training for a spot in the Atlanta rotation.

Said AFL executive director Steve Cobb in a prepared statement, "Tommy Hanson dominated some of the finest young hitters in the game. His performance was truly remarkable. He accomplished what once seemed improbable - a pitcher winning the Joe Black Award."

Hanson added a hard slider to his repertoire during the season after being promoted to Double-A Mississippi from Class-A Myrtle Beach. In Arizona, his focus centered on upgrading his changeup. Those two pitches combined with his mid-90s fastball and an above-average curveball show why Frank Wren has deemed Hanson off-limits in all trade talks.

"He was overpowering when I had him last season at Myrtle Beach, but he took it up another notch or two this fall," said Pelicans manager Rocket Wheeler, who also managed Mesa in the AFL. "To see the way he has developed as a pitcher over the past year is really impressive. It doesn't take an expert to realize that Tommy is on a mission."

WINTER WONDERLAND

For the second straight winter, pitcher **Edgar Osuna** is holding his own against much more experienced competition in the Mexican Pacific League. The lefthander did not allow a run in 14 straight relief outings through Dec. 10 for Hermosillo while improving his ERA to 2.45. Osuna also had given up runs in only two of his first 19 appearances and limited opposing hitters to a .238 batting average.

"I'm not surprised, because he really knows how to pitch," said **Randy Ingle**, who managed Osuna in 2008 at Class-A Rome. "It doesn't matter whether he starts or relieves, he just knows how to get guys out. He's fearless out there. He doesn't throw hard, but his off-speed pitches, especially his changeup, are as good as you're going to see."

Named Rome's pitcher of the year in '08, the 21-year-old Osuna moved into the starting rotation midway through the season and finished with an impressive 10-5 record and a 3.38 ERA in 30 games (14 starts). He has excellent command of all his pitches and is attracting significant interest from the Atlanta front office...

The Braves are also encouraged by the showing of **Gregor Blanco** with La Guaira in Venezuela this winter. Blanco ranked second in the league with a .489 on-base percentage, was tied for second with three triples, and was third with a .369 batting average through Dec. 10...

Diory Hernandez, who was added to Atlanta's 40-man roster in late November, is also putting together a strong performance during winter ball in preparation for a possible utility role with Atlanta in 2009. Hernandez is the starting shortstop with Escogido in the Dominican Winter League and owned a .325 batting average with six home runs and 23 RBIs in his first 36 games...

Reliever **Luis Valdez**, a potential candidate for the Braves' bullpen, had a 3-0 record with a 4.30 ERA in 13 games with Azucareros. Valdez led the organization with 28 saves at Double-A Mississippi last year.

NOTES

- The Mets selected outfielder **Carl Loadenthal** in the Triple-A phase of the Rule 5 draft at the Winter Meetings. The speedy Loadenthal, who split last season between Mississippi and Triple-A Richmond, ranked second in the organization in stolen bases (40) in 2007 and won the Carolina League's batting title (.323) in 2006...

- **Brent Lillibridge**, one of four players traded to the White Sox in early December in exchange for pitchers Javier Vazquez and Boone Logan, understood the transaction despite being disappointed that he will not be with the Braves next season.

  "I never thought I'd be with three different teams in a span of three years," said Lillibridge, who was obtained by the Braves from Pittsburgh prior to the 2007 season in the Mike Gonzalez-Adam LaRoche deal. "But I realize it would have been a tough go with the Braves this spring. (Shortstop) Yunel Escobar and I are the same age, and he's established himself in the major leagues. The White Sox want to rebuild their team around speed, so from my standpoint, it looks like a good fit."...

- The Braves re-signed pitcher **Jerome Gamble**, who split the 2008 season between the Double-A and Triple-A levels in the Atlanta farm system. Gamble, who struggled to an 0-5 record with a 7.88 ERA during a mid-season promotion as a starter at Richmond, pitched well as a swingman in Mississippi, where he went 3-5, 4.09 in 23 games, including seven starts...

- The Braves released right-handed pitcher **Rodriguez Lopez**. A former starter for Baltimore, Lopez signed late in the regular season with Atlanta while still recovering from ligament replacement surgery...

- Second baseman **Paul Bennett** announced his retirement as a player. Signed by the Braves as a non-drafted free agent in 2006 out of Elon University, Bennett batted .219 in his three seasons with the organization...

- The recession has come at a most inopportune time for Gwinnett County, which is in the process of building a new ballpark for the Braves' Triple-A club. With money tight throughout the economy, county officials have yet to find a corporate sponsor for the facility. Should one not be signed prior to September, the Braves would receive all of the revenue once an agreement is reached thereafter. Based on similar sponsorships throughout the minor leagues, as much as $800,000 could be involved.

I THINK I'LL BE AT EASE DURING TRAINING CAMP

EDITOR'S NOTE

Jordan Schafer is a 22-year-old centerfielder that's ranked by ChopTalk as the No.-3 prospect in the Braves' farm system. He was suspended for the first 50 games of last season for alleged use of a banned substance. After returning, he started slowly at Double-A Mississippi before a strong finish left him at .269 for the season with 10 home runs, 51 RBIs and 12 steals in 84 games. He also played errorless ball for the season.

THIS PAST SEASON definitely taught me a lot about baseball and about life in general. In everything you do, you have to deal with ups and downs. The approach I'm taking is, all of that is in the past now. I'm ready to move on and head to spring training and show Bobby Cox and the rest of the Atlanta staff what I'm capable of doing.

I believe having as much success as I did in spring training last year will definitely be a big help to me going into this season. Also, finishing up the regular season on a strong note during the last month allowed me to end in a positive frame of mind.

I finally felt comfortable again during August, and I finally felt like myself out there on the field. I was having fun playing the game again.

For a while there during the season, I didn't enjoy going to the field. It was a tough situation, particularly from a mental standpoint, but I worked my way through it and wound up having some success.

Playing in Mexico earlier this off-season was a good experience. It's a completely different game down there. For example, one game down there, I saw 14 pitches and 12 of them were off-speed pitches. I only saw two fastballs, and one of them was the first pitch of the game.

> "I FINALLY FELT COMFORTABLE AGAIN DURING AUGUST, AND I FINALLY FELT LIKE MYSELF OUT THERE ON THE FIELD."

The pitchers down there are older, a lot more veteran guys who would rather walk you than give up a hit. Especially for a guy like me, an aggressive hitter, it's difficult. I had to make some adjustments because the pitchers really feed off your aggressiveness.

If you are aggressive at the plate, they're going to keep the ball outside of the strike zone. But I believe going down there really helped me, particularly in terms of being more selective at the plate.

I batted leadoff the entire time I was there, and I had never seen first-pitch curveballs. At Mississippi this past season, I saw curveballs and changeups in fastball counts, but I had never seen so many breaking pitches as I saw in Mexico.

It really forced me to make some adjustments, which is what this game is all about. Pitchers at the major league level are capable of doing the same thing, so I believe getting a big dose of that will prepare me for the road ahead.

Right now, I'm working out every day, trying to make my weaknesses my strengths. Obviously, my strikeout rate was too high last year, and I need to cut down on that by being more selective.

I know I'm still young, but I need to mature in some parts of the game. I need to handle some things differently.

Physically, I'm close to being ready. But I realize that you're always going to grow, and you're always going to learn if you approach this game the right way. Experience teaches you a lot of things in baseball, and that's what I'm looking to add every time I go out on the field.

Last year in spring training was a great experience. I felt very comfortable getting to know Bobby (Cox) and T.P. (Terry Pendleton). I also got to know some of the veterans.

With last spring under my belt, I believe I'll feel at ease when I report to camp. I don't envision putting too much pressure on myself. I see myself going in and playing my game and proving that I belong.

ROSTER

PITCHERS (23)

No.	Name	B-T	HT	WT	Birthdate-Place	Residence	2008 Club	W-L	ERA
46	ACOSTA, MANNY	S-R	6-4	170	5/1/81 in Colon, Panama	Colon, Panama	ATLANTA	3-5	3.57
							Richmond#	0-0	0.00
30	BENNETT, JEFF	R-R	6-3	200	6/10/80 in Donelson, TN	Lebanon, TN	ATLANTA	3-7	3.70
							Myrtle Beach#	0-0	0.00
56	BOYER, BLAINE	R-R	6-3	215	7/11/81 in Atlanta, GA	Marietta, GA	ATLANTA	2-6	5.88
26	BUENO, FRANCISLEY	L-L	5-11	200	3/5/81 in Havana, Cuba	Santo Domingo, DR	Richmond	2-6	5.23
							ATLANTA	0-0	7.71
57	CAMPILLO, JORGE	R-R	6-1	225	8/10/78 in Tijuana, Mexico	Tijuana, Mexico	Richmond	0-0	0.00
							ATLANTA	8-7	3.91
38	CARLYLE, BUDDY	L-R	6-3	210	12/21/77 in Omaha, NE	Papillion, NE	Richmond	0-0	7.04
							ATLANTA	2-0	3.59
51	GONZALEZ, MIKE	R-L	6-2	213	5/23/78 in Robstown, TX	Deer Park, TX	Mississippi#	0-0	0.00
							Richmond#	1-0	1.50
							ATLANTA	0-3	4.28
15	HUDSON, TIM**	R-R	6-1	170	7/14/75 in Columbus, GA	Peachtree City, GA	ATLANTA	11-7	3.17
49	JURRJENS, JAIR	R-R	6-1	200	1/29/86 in Willemstad, Curacao	Willemstad, Curacao	ATLANTA	13-10	3.68
--	LEREW, ANTHONY	L-R	6-3	220	10/28/82 in Carlisle, PA	Wellsville, PA	Gulf Coast League	0-1	5.40
							Richmond	1-4	4.14
--	LOGAN, BOONE	R-L	6-5	215	8/13/84 in San Antonio, TX	Helotes, TX	CHICAGO (AL)	2-3	5.95
--	MAREK, STEPHEN	R-R	6-2	200	9/3/83 in Houston, TX	Sealy, TX	Arkansas	2-5	3.66
							Mississippi	1-2	3.21
50	MORTON, CHARLIE	R-R	6-4	190	11/12/83 in Flemington, NJ	Johns Island, SC	Richmond	5-2	2.05
							ATLANTA	4-8	6.15
58	MOYLAN, PETER**	R-R	6-2	200	12/2/78 in Lesmurdie, Australia	Suwanee, GA	ATLANTA	0-1	1.59
--	O'FLAHERTY, ERIC	L-L	6-2	220	2/5/85 in Walla Walla, WA	Walla Walla, WA	SEATTLE	0-1	20.25
							West Tennessee	0-0	0.00
							Tacoma	1-2	4.96
61	PARR, JAMES	R-R	6-1	185	2/27/86 in Albuquerque, NM	Albuquerque, NM	Mississippi	8-4	3.69
							Richmond	5-3	3.23
							ATLANTA	1-0	4.84
--	REDMOND, TODD	R-R	6-3	213	5/17/85 in St. Petersburg, FL	St. Petersburg, FL	Mississippi	13-5	3.52
37	REYES, JO-JO	L-L	6-2	230	11/20/84 in West Covina, CA	Riverside, CA	Richmond	1-1	2.31
							ATLANTA	3-11	5.81
40	RIDGWAY, JEFF	R-L	6-3	210	8/17/80 in Port Angeles, WA	Summerville, SC	Richmond	4-0	5.47
							ATLANTA	1-0	3.72
39	SORIANO, RAFAEL**	R-R	6-1	220	12/19/79 in San Jose, DR	Andres Boca Chica, DR	ATLANTA	0-1	2.57
							DSL-Braves#	0-1	0.00
							Mississippi#	0-0	0.00
--	STOCKMAN, PHIL	R-R	6-8	251	1/25/80 in Oldham, Lancashire UK	Brisbane, Australia	Richmond	1-1	2.10
							ATLANTA	0-0	0.00
--	VALDEZ, LUIS	R-R	6-2	195	5/5/84 in Sabrana Palenque, DR	San Cristobal Palenque, DR	Mississippi	4-3	2.76
33	VAZQUEZ, JAVIER	R-R	6-1	210	7/25/76 in Ponce, PR	Ponce, PR	CHICAGO (AL)	12-16	4.67

CATCHERS (3)

No.	Name	B-T	HT	WT	Birthdate-Place	Residence	2008 Club	AVG	G
16	McCANN, BRIAN	L-R	6-3	230	2/20/84 in Athens, GA	Suwanee, GA	ATLANTA	.301	145
--	ROSS, DAVID	R-R	6-2	238	3/19/77 in Bainbridge, GA	Tallahassee, FL	Sarasota#	.182	4
							Louisville#	.206	10
							CINCINNATI	.231	52
							Pawtucket	.250	6
							BOSTON	.125	8
5	SAMMONS, CLINT	R-R	6-0	200	5/15/83 in Decatur, GA	Atlanta, GA	Richmond	.237	81
							ATLANTA	.148	23

INFIELDERS (7)

No.	Name	B-T	HT	WT	Birthdate-Place	Residence	2008 Club	AVG	G
19	ESCOBAR, YUNEL	R-R	6-2	200	11/2/82 in Havana, Cuba	Miami, FL	ATLANTA	.288	136
--	HERNANDEZ, DIORY	R-R	6-0	185	4/8/84 in San Pedro de Macoris, DR	San Pedro de Macoris, DR	Mississippi	.286	22
							Richmond	.288	120
4	INFANTE, OMAR	R-R	6-0	180	12/26/81 in Puerto la Cruz, VZ	Amzuatezuiz, VZ	Richmond#	.364	3
							ATLANTA	.293	96
2	JOHNSON, KELLY	L-R	6-1	205	2/22/82 in Austin, TX	Atlanta, GA	ATLANTA	.287	150
10	JONES, CHIPPER	S-R	6-4	210	4/24/72 in DeLand, FL	Carrizo Springs, TX	ATLANTA	.364	128
22	KOTCHMAN, CASEY	L-L	6-3	215	2/22/83 in St. Petersburg, FL	Seminole, FL	LOS ANGELES (AL)	.287	100
							ATLANTA	.237	43
14	PRADO, MARTIN	R-R	6-1	190	10/27/83 in Maracay, Venezuela	Maracay, Venezuela	Mississippi#	.263	5
							ATLANTA	.320	78

OUTFIELDERS (5)

No.	Name	B-T	HT	WT	Birthdate-Place	Residence	2008 Club	AVG	G
24	ANDERSON, JOSH	L-R	6-2	195	8/10/82 in Somerset, KY	Eubank, KY	Richmond	.314	121
							ATLANTA	.294	40
18	BLANCO, GREGOR	L-L	5-11	170	12/24/83 in Caracas, VZ	Cua, VZ	ATLANTA	.251	144
23	DIAZ, MATT	R-R	6-1	215	3/3/78 in Portland, OR	Lakeland, FL	ATLANTA	.244	43
							Mississippi#	.231	7
							Richmond#	.167	4
7	FRANCOEUR, JEFF	R-R	6-4	220	1/8/84 in Atlanta, GA	Lilburn, GA	ATLANTA	.239	155
							Mississippi	.538	3
28	JONES, BRANDON	L-R	6-1	210	12/10/83 in Panama City, FL	Wewahitchka, FL	Richmond	.260	95
							ATLANTA	.267	41

Injury Rehabilitation Assignment; & Includes injury rehabilitation time
** 60-day disabled list
^ Restricted list
* Option year is *not* included in contract status

Note: ML Service is through 2008 season

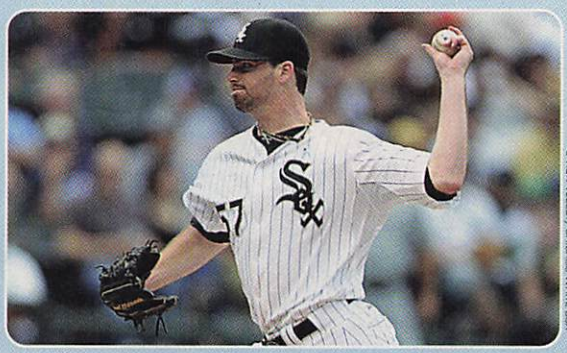
G	GS	CG	SV	IP	H	R	ER	BB	SO	ML Serv	Contract
46	0	0	3	53.0	48	25	21	26	31	1.052	2008
4	3	0	0	3.2	4	0	0	2	4		
72	4	0	3	97.1	86	44	40	47	68	2.012	2008
4	4	0	0	4.0	3	0	0	0	3		
76	0	0	1	72.0	73	51	47	25	67	2.122	2008
19	14	0	0	84.1	100	51	49	29	59	0.011	2008
1	0	0	0	2.1	5	2	2	1	1		
1	1	0	0	4.1	5	0	0	0	4	1.101	2008
39	25	1	0	158.2	158	74	69	38	107		
2	2	0	0	7.2	11	7	6	3	7	2.055	2008
45	0	0	0	62.2	52	26	25	26	59		
4	0	0	0	5.0	7	0	0	0	4	5.014	2008
5	0	0	1	6.0	5	1	1	1	8		
36	0	0	14	33.2	26	21	16	14	44		
23	22	1	0	142.0	125	53	50	40	85	9.119	2009*
31	31	0	0	188.1	188	87	77	70	139	1.047	2008
5	5	0	0	11.2	11	9	7	6	8	1.126	2008
9	8	0	0	37.0	43	24	17	20	22		
55	0	0	0	42.1	57	31	28	14	42	2.072	2008
34	0	0	3	46.2	39	20	19	21	57	0.000	2008
10	0	0	1	14.0	12	5	5	6	11		
13	12	0	0	79.0	51	20	18	27	72	0.103	2008
16	15	0	0	74.2	80	56	51	41	48		
7	0	0	1	5.2	5	1	1	1	5	2.061	2008
7	0	0	0	6.2	16	15	15	4	4	1.062	2008
1	0	0	0	2.0	1	0	0	0	2		
14	0	0	2	16.1	23	9	9	9	19		
18	17	0	0	95.0	87	40	39	37	81	0.027	2008
10	9	0	0	55.2	49	20	20	14	44		
5	5	0	0	22.1	29	13	12	9	14		
28	27	0	0	166.1	164	72	65	33	133	0.000	2008
8	8	0	0	39.0	31	11	10	16	38	1.046	2008
23	22	0	0	113.0	134	77	73	52	78		
44	0	0	4	52.2	67	38	32	26	57	0.052	2008
10	0	0	0	9.2	7	4	4	1	8		
14	0	0	3	14.0	7	5	4	9	16	6.057	2009
2	2	0	0	2.0	3	1	0	0	2		
2	1	0	0	2.0	1	0	0	1	2		
19	0	0	2	30.0	15	7	7	18	26	0.144	2008
6	0	0	0	7.1	2	0	0	4	9		
55	0	0	28	65.1	48	30	20	36	77	0.000	2008
33	33	1	0	208.1	214	113	108	61	200	10.141	2010

AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	SB	ML Serv	Contract
509	68	153	42	1	23	87	57	64	5	3.117	2012
11	2	2	0	0	0	1	3	4	0	6.001	2010
34	5	7	1	1	2	3	3	13	0		
134	17	31	9	0	3	13	32	36	0		
28	4	7	1	0	1	3	1	7	0		
8	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	3	0		
278	23	66	18	0	1	22	21	60	7	0.083	2008
54	2	8	0	0	1	4	5	12	0		

AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	SB	ML Serv	Contract
514	71	148	24	2	10	60	59	62	2	1.121	2008
77	8	22	3	1	2	8	6	8	1	0.000	2008
459	46	132	23	3	5	53	20	73	7		
11	3	4	1	0	0	3	1	1	0	5.120	2008
317	45	93	24	3	3	40	22	44	0		
547	86	157	39	6	12	69	52	113	11	3.127	2008
439	82	160	24	1	22	75	90	61	4	15.024	2008*
373	47	107	24	0	12	54	18	23	2	3.144	2011
152	18	36	4	1	2	20	18	16	0		
19	2	5	2	0	0	3	3	2	0	1.105	2008
228	36	73	18	4	2	33	21	29	3		

AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	SB	ML Serv	Contract
494	77	155	25	4	4	40	30	57	42	0.076	2008
136	21	40	7	1	3	12	8	33	10		
430	52	108	14	4	1	38	74	99	13	1.000	2008
135	9	33	2	0	2	14	3	32	4	3.157	2008
26	5	6	0	0	1	4	2	5	1		
12	0	2	0	0	0	1	1	3	0		
599	70	143	33	3	11	71	39	111	0	3.088	2008
13	3	7	0	1	0	2	1	2	0		
346	44	90	24	1	8	52	46	76	9	0.076	2008
116	16	31	10	1	1	17	7	28	1		

A BOONE TO THE PEN



© RON VESELY/CHICAGO WHITE SOX

LEFT-HANDED RELIEVER Boone Logan appears to be something of an afterthought in the Braves' deal to acquire starter Javier Vazquez. Yet, ironically, the negotiations that culminated in the six-player trade between Atlanta and the Chicago White Sox Dec. 4, were initiated by talks about Logan.

"[White Sox GM Kenny Williams] and I talked, probably the week before Thanksgiving week," Wren recalled. "We started off talking about Logan. Then we started expanding it."

Logan, a 24-year-old native of San Antonio, Texas, is a big (6-5, 215), strong, hard-thrower, who is 4-4 with a 5.87 ERA in 144 games over parts of three major league seasons.

"He's a young kid who first broke into the scene out of A ball (in 2006)," said Bobby Cox. "[Chicago] brought him to the major league camp, and he made the team that year. He had a terrific first half last year. I don't know what happened the second half."

That second half saw Logan's ERA balloon from a skinny 1.95 on July 9, over 36 appearances, to his season-ending 5.95 - an 18.90 ERA over his final 19 outings (21 earned runs and 30 hits in 10 innings). He fell out of grace with White Sox manager (and former Brave) Ozzie Guillen, who left him off Chicago's playoff roster.

Logan's dismal finish to 2008 didn't dampen the Braves' long-term view of him.

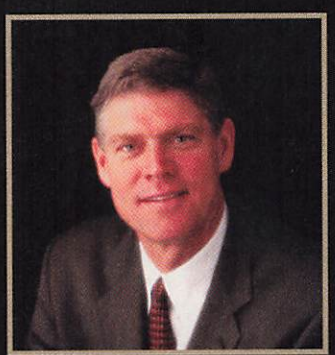
"We're talking young guys that go from being on top of their game to not sure if they belong," said Wren. "It's a learning process in getting established."

Logan may get the chance to make an immediate impact in the Atlanta bullpen, depending on the Braves' ability to re-sign last year's top lefty reliever, Will Ohman, currently a free agent.

- JON COOPER

I WON'T CHEAT!

GAME | FANS | SELF



"Youth athletes who feel the pressure to cheat have been damaged the most by the steroid problem. Let's work together to create a drug free atmosphere in sports."

–Dale Murphy

2 TIME NL MVP, ATLANTA BRAVES

FOUNDER OF THE I WON'T CHEAT FOUNDATION

www.iwontcheat.com

SPRING TRAINING 2009

ATLANTA

INDIVIDUAL TICKETS for the 2009 Atlanta Braves Spring Training home games at Disney's Wide World of Sports Complex in Lake Buena Vista, Fla., will go on sale Saturday, Jan. 10, at 10 a.m. (Eastern) via Ticketmaster (407-839-3900), Ticketmaster.com and the Disney Wide World of Sports Complex box office. Prices range from $15 for general admission/lawn to $28 for Lower Reserved. There is a $4 per seat premium charge for games against the Yankees, Red Sox and Mets.

For information on season and group tickets, call (407) 939-GAME (4263), or visit disneysports.com/atlantabraves. Season tickets are priced from $255 to $425. Various mini-plans also are available.

This schedule, including game times, is tentative and subject to change. No broadcast information was available at press time.

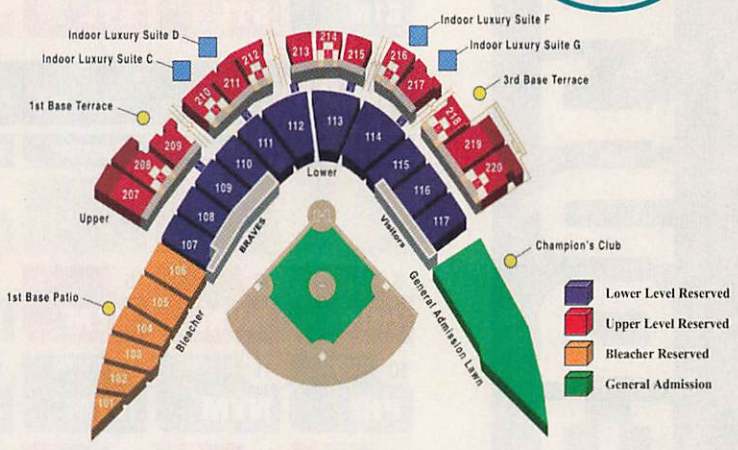
Tickets for the two exhibition games at Turner Field (April 3-4 vs. Detroit) also will go on sale Jan. 10 at 10 a.m. at braves.com, via Ticketmaster (1-800-326-4000), and at Publix Ticketmaster locations.

There are 18 games scheduled at Disney's 9,500-seat Champion Stadium, including World Baseball Classic exhibitions Mar. 3 (vs. Panama) and 5 (vs. Venezuela).

For more information on the travel packages that include game tickets and to book online, visit braves.com. Disney's Wide World of Sports is located just southwest of Orlando in Lake Buena Vista, Fla.

SPRING TRAINING Braves at Disney's Wide World of Sports

CHAMPION STADIUM
AT DISNEY'S WIDE WORLD OF SPORTS



BROADCAST INFO TO BE ANNOUNCED.
GAME TIMES EASTERN AND SUBJECT TO CHANGE; ALL HOME GAMES @ CHAMPION STADIUM, DISNEY'S WIDE WORLD OF SPORTS

FEB/MARCH/APRIL

HOME AWAY

Braves

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
			25 1:05 PM DET @ Lakeland	26 1:05 PM HOU	27 1:05 PM PIT @ Bradenton	28 1:05 PM TOR @ Dunedin
1 1:05 PM PHI	2	3 1:05 PM *WBC Panama	4 1:05 PM NYY	5 1:05 PM *WBC Venezuela	6 7:05 PM HOU	7 1:05 PM NYY @ Tampa
8 1:05 PM PHI	9	10 1:05 PM HOU @ Kissimmee	11 1:05 PM PHI @ Clearwater	12 1:05 PM WAS	13 1:05 PM FLA @ Jupiter	14 1:05 PM STL @ Jupiter
15 1:05 PM HOU	16	17 1:05 PM NYM	18 1:10 PM NYM @ Port St. Lucie	19 7:05 PM DET	20 1:05 PM FLA	21 1:05 PM NYM
22 1:10 PM NYM @ Port St. Lucie	23	24 6:05 PM PIT	25 1:05 PM WAS @ Viera	26 1:05 PM TOR	27 1:05 PM DET	28 1:05 PM NYY
29 1:05 PM DET @ Lakeland	30 1:05 PM BOS	31 7:05 PM HOU @ Kissimmee	1 1:05 PM DET @ Lakeland	2 1:05 PM HOU @ Kissimmee	3 7:05 PM DET Turner Field	4 1:05 PM DET Turner Field

*WBC (World Baseball Classic)

2009 SCHEDULE

GAME TIMES EASTERN, BROADCAST INFO TO BE ANNOUNCED.
TENTATIVE; SUBJECT TO CHANGE
FOR SEASON, GROUP AND SUITE TICKET INFORMATION CALL (404) 577-9100

APRIL

Braves HOME AWAY

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
			1	2	3	4
5 8:05 PM SEASON OPENER PHI ESPN2	6	7 7:05 PM PHI	8 3:05 PM PHI	9	10 HOME OPENER WSH	11 WSH
12 WSH	13	14 FLA	15 FLA	16 FLA	17 7:05 PM PIT	18 12:35 PM PIT
19 1:35 PM PIT	20 7:05 PM WSH	21 7:05 PM WSH	22 7:05 PM WSH	23	24 7:10 PM CIN	25 1:10 PM CIN
26 1:10 PM CIN	27 STL	28 STL	29 STL	30		

MAY

Braves HOME AWAY

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
					1 HOU	2 HOU
3 HOU	4 NYM	5 NYM	6 FLA	7 FLA	8 7:05 PM PHI	9 7:05 PM PHI
10 1:35 PM PHI	11 7:10 PM NYM	12 7:10 PM NYM	13 1:10 PM NYM	14	15 ARI	16 ARI
17 ARI	18 COL	19 COL	20 COL	21 COL	22 TOR	23 TOR
24 TOR	25 4:05 PM SF	26 10:15 PM SF	27 10:15 PM SF	28 ARI	29 ARI	30 ARI
31 ARI						

JUNE

Braves HOME AWAY

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
	1	2 CHC	3 CHC	4 CHC	5 MIL	6 MIL
7 MIL	8 PIT	9 PIT	10 PIT	11 PIT	12 7:05 PM BAL	13 7:05 PM BAL
14 1:35 PM BAL	15	16 7:10 PM CIN	17 7:10 PM CIN	18 12:35 PM CIN	19 BOS	20 BOS
21 BOS	22	23 NYY	24 NYY	25 NYY	26 BOS	27 BOS
28 BOS	29	30 PHI				

2009 SCHEDULE

JULY

HOME AWAY

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
			1 PHI	2 PHI	3 7:05 PM WAS	4 WAS
5 1:35 PM WAS	6 CHC	7 CHC	8 CHC	9 8:40 PM COL	10 9:10 PM COL	11 8:10 PM COL
12 3:10 PM COL	13	14 ST. LOUIS ALL-STAR GAME	15	16 NYM	17 MYM	18 NYM
19 NYM	20 SF	21 SF	22 SF	23 SF	24 8:05 PM MIL	25 7:05 PM MIL
26 2:05 PM MIL	27	28 FLA	29 FLA	30 FLA	31 LA	

AUGUST

HOME AWAY

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
						1 LA
2 LA	3 SD	4 SD	5 SD	6 10:10 PM LA	7 10:10 PM LA	8 LA
9 LA	10	11 WAS	12 WAS	13	14 PHI	15 PHI
16 PHI	17	18 7:10 PM NYM	19 7:10 PM NYM	20 7:10 PM NYM	21 FLA	22 FLA
23 FLA	24	25 SD	26 SD	27 SD	28 PHI	29 7:05 PM PHI
30 1:35 PM PHI	31 FLA					

SEPT./OCT.

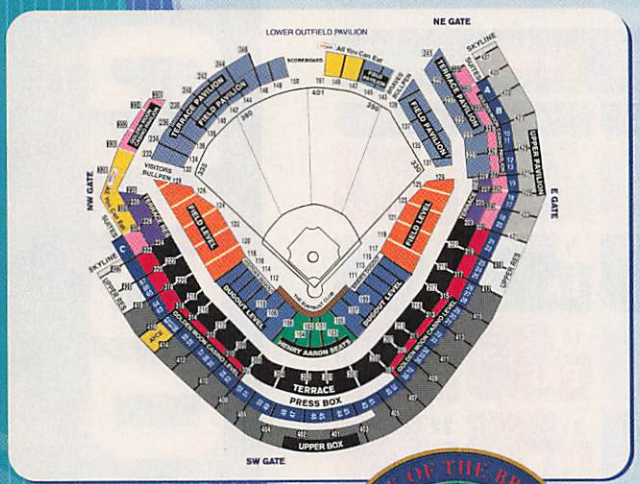
HOME AWAY

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
		1 FLA	2 FLA	3 FLA	4 CIN	5 CIN
6 CIN	7	8 HOU	9 HOU	10 HOU	11 8:15 PM STL	12 7:15 PM STL
13 2:15 PM STL	14	15 NYM	16 NYM	17 NYM	18 PHI	19 PHI
20 PHI	21 7:10 PM NYM	22 7:10 PM NYM	23 7:10 PM NYM	24	25 7:05 PM WAS	26 1:05 PM WAS
27 1:35 PM WAS	28 FLA	29 FLA	30 FLA	1 WAS	2 WAS	3 WAS
4 WAS						

GIVE A GIFT CARD

Braves Gift Cards are available in denominations from $25 to $250 and can be used to purchase Tickets, Concessions and Merchandise.

To purchase Gift Cards or to obtain more information, visit Braves.com or the Braves Clubhouse Store at CNN Center (call 404-523-5854).



HOME OF THE BRAVES
TURNER FIELD

TICKET INFO

At press time, the Braves had not released information about the sale of individual tickets for the 2009 season. However, fans interested in attending games against the Yankees (June 23-25) and/or Red Sox (June 26-28) at Turner Field should consider registering at braves.com for a chance to buy tickets to these games that will be in great demand. The only way to be guaranteed of getting tickets for these games is to purchase a ticket plan package. A limited number of individual seats will be available for these games, and a random drawing will be held among all those who register to determine who can buy whatever tickets are available for these six interleague games.

SEASON TICKETS DISCOUNT

Season tickets are on sale, and the Braves are offering something new for budget-conscious fans. An Upper Box full season ticket behind home plate is just $415 - $5 per game (gate price $12-$16).

Call (404) 577-9100 or visit braves.com for information on all season ticket plans, including half-season, weekend plans, 20-game plans, and season parking. Reservations and deposits also are being accepted for group ticket purchases.

MUSEUM & TOUR INFO

The Ivan Allen Jr. Braves Museum features more than 500 Braves artifacts that trace the team's history from its beginnings in Boston (1871-1952) to Milwaukee (1953-65) to Atlanta (1966-present). It is located on the northwest side of Turner Field at aisle 134. The museum opens two and a half hours before each game and closes in the middle of the seventh inning. The museum is open year-round and is the starting point of one-hour guided tours of Turner Field. Tours leave on the hour.

Tour reservations are not necessary for individuals or groups of less than 20 people. Tickets can be purchased the day of the tour at the main ticket window. Free parking in the Green lot.

Admission to the museum during games is one token ($2) and $5 on non-game days. Tour tickets are $12 for adults, $7 for children and $10 for groups of 20 or more. Walk-up tickets can be purchased at the ticket window. Groups of 20 or more and school groups must make reservations two weeks in advance by calling (404) 614-2311.

HOURS OF OPERATION

OCTOBER - MARCH	
Monday - Saturday	10 a.m. - 2 p.m.
DEC. 23-JAN. 3	CLOSED
APRIL - OCTOBER	
Monday - Saturday	9 a.m. - 3 p.m.
Sunday	1 - 3 p.m.

TOUR TICKETS

ADULTS	$12
CHILDREN 13 and Under	$7
MILITARY	$7
GROUP	$10

SCHOOL GROUP PRICES

CHILDREN	$5
ADULTS	$7

*Subject to change
Tours not available when the Braves have afternoon home games

STAT PARADE 2008

RECORD BREAKDOWN

Score First	52-23 (.693)
Shutouts	7-14 (.333)
Leading after 6 innings	59-14 (.809)
Trailing after 6 innings	9-64 (.123)
Leading after 7 innings	59-10 (.855)
Trailing after 7 innings	7-68 (.093)
Leading after 8 innings	64-4 (.941)
Trailing after 8 innings	3-76 (.038)
First Game of Series	22-32 (.407)
First Game of Homestand	7-6 (.538)
First Game of Road trip	4-10 (.286)
Following an Off Day	14-11 (.560)
With a Homer	49-37 (.570)
With no Homers	23-53 (.303)
Allow a Homer	31-64 (.326)
Allow no Homers	41-26 (.612)
1-Run Decisions	11-30 (.268)
2-Run Decisions	14-9 (.609)
3-Run Decisions	10-12 (.455)
Final At-Bat Decisions	13-24 (.351)
In Errorless Games	39-44 (.470)
Score 2 or Fewer	2-45 (.043)
Score 3	6-21 (.222)
Score 4 or More	64-24 (.727)

GAME-ENDING HOMERS

Francoeur	1	5/24 vs. ARI (Qualls)
Escobar	1	6/2 vs. FLA (Kensing)

TOP BATTERS VS. LH PITCHERS

C. Jones	.394
Johnson	.333
Infante	.325
Diaz	.319
McCann	.299
Prado	.283

TOP BATTERS VS. RH PITCHERS

Prado	.349
C. Jones	.349
Anderson	.341
Kotsay	.305
McCann	.301
Escobar	.299

AVERAGE RUN SUPPORT

Parr	7.2
Glavine	5.4
Jurrjens	5.1
Hampton	4.9
Smoltz	4.8
Hudson	4.7
Morton	4.5
Campillo	4.4
Reyes	3.8
Bennett	3.3
James	3.0

TOP PITCHERS VS. LH BATTERS

Ohman	.200
Nunez	.211
Smoltz	.226
Carlyle	.247
Campillo	.249
Hudson	.255

TOP PITCHERS VS. RH BATTERS

Gonzalez	.196
Carlyle	.215
Acosta	.218
Hudson	.223
Bennett	.228
Morton	.245

TEAM RECORD BY STARTING PITCHER

Parr	4-1 (.800)
Smoltz	3-2 (.600)
Jurrjens	17-14 (.548)
Campillo	13-12 (.520)
Hudson	11-11 (.500)
Morton	6-9 (.400)
Hampton	5-8 (.385)
Reyes	7-15 (.318)
James	2-5 (.286)
Bennett	1-3 (.250)
Glavine	3-10 (.231)

Brian McCann batted .301 against right-handed pitchers and .299 against lefthanders.

CATCHER CUTDOWNS

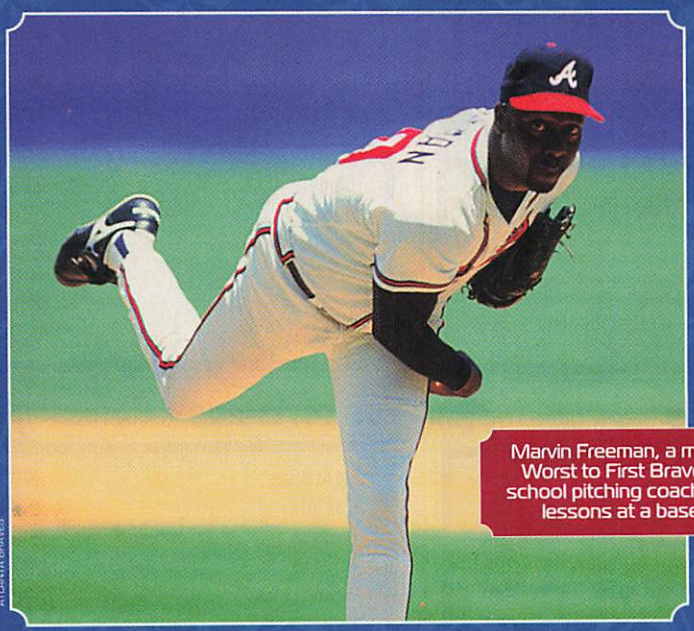
Miller	6/15 (.286)
McCann	20/113 (.150)
Sammons	0/11 (.000)

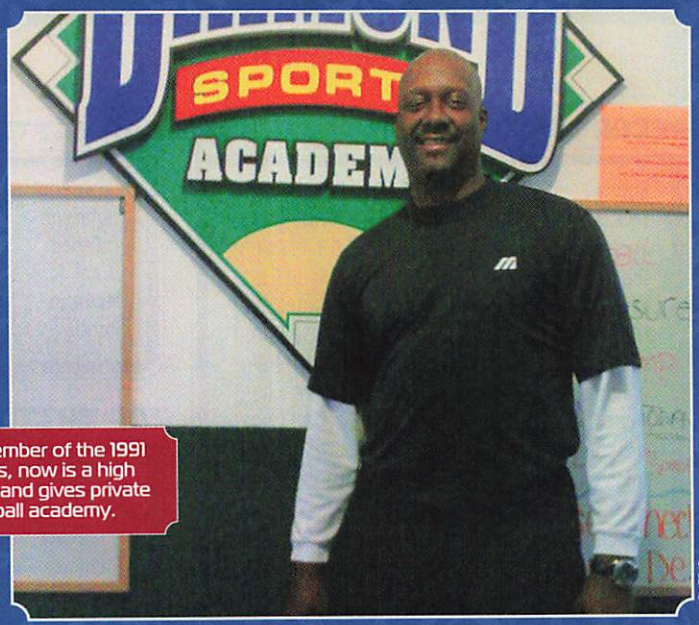
TEAM RECORD BY CATCHER

McCann	61-71 (.462)
Miller	7-10 (.412)
Sammons	4-9 (.308)

INFIELD HITS

Blanco	26
Escobar	19
Johnson	16
Francoeur	14


ATLANTA BRAVES



SHEDAI

Marvin Freeman, a member of the 1991 Worst to First Braves, now is a high school pitching coach and gives private lessons at a baseball academy.

INSTANT CREDIBILITY

Freeman's Big League Experience Carries a Lot of Weight With Young Pitchers

BY BRIAN KNAPP

MARVIN FREEMAN thought the separation might be short-lived when he walked away from baseball after pitching in only one game for Toronto's Triple-A affiliate in 1997. His intuition was right on the money.

Now 45, Freeman has spent the last four years - he will begin his fifth in March - as pitching coach for the Homewood-Flossmoor High School baseball team in Flossmoor, Ill., a budding multi-cultural Chicago suburb. His service there comes on the heels of a head coaching stop at nearby Rich Central High School. Teaching the game comes naturally.

"I really enjoy when you've got a pitcher, and he's working on a particular problem and sees it be successful," Freeman said. "The change in expression is enough of a reward. I know how difficult it is to be a pitcher. To have someone there who can stop the flow really helps."

The transition from player to coach has provided a beneficial learning experience for Freeman, who pitched for four teams, including the Braves (1990-93), during his decade-long run in the major leagues (1986-96).

"I've learned that everybody's different," said Freeman, who attended Jackson State University in Jackson, Miss. "There's no one particular way to coach everyone. You have to get to know each player's personality and make sure they're being enhanced, not confused, by your instruction."

Freeman believes the time he spent at baseball's highest level, including the years he spent under former Braves pitching coach Leo Mazzone, gives him a head start on other coaches at the prep level. That's because he actually achieved the goal most players have set for themselves.

"Players get a little bit more attention from me than they get from a guy who didn't pitch in the big leagues," he said. "People want to know what it takes to get to the top. It really gives me a kind of respect some coaches don't have."

Freeman's deep well of pitching knowledge and high-level experience provide the anvil upon which Homewood-Flossmoor High School pitchers have been shaped since 2005. That instruction is invaluable to the players, according to the school's head coach, Todd Sippel.

"Marvin holds an enormous amount of credibility when teaching our young athletes, more specifically our pitchers, since he spent 11 years in the major leagues as both a starter and reliever," said Sippel, who guided a 19-16 team to within a win of the state playoffs last spring. "He's very knowledgeable and relates very well with the athletes of today."

For the time being, Freeman seems content to mold young minds in the high school ranks. He has a 12-year-old son, Justin, and wants to remain as close to home as possible. Freeman does, however, hope to return to the big leagues someday.

"I would love to," Freeman said. "I hope that happens somewhere down the road. I'll probably want to look more seriously into that in the next couple of years. With my daughter, I was away from home a lot. I always said I wanted to be home throughout [my son's] formative years. I'm hoping to get back in the game, but at this point, I don't want to be on the road."

Freeman grew keenly familiar with the demands of life on the road as a player. He spent parts of four seasons with Atlanta,

compiling an 11-5 record with four saves and a 3.44 earned run average in 122 games. He appeared in 34 games for the Braves during their miraculous run to the National League pennant in 1991 and finished second to Mike Stanton in appearances (58) in 1992.

"We kicked butt," said Freeman, who remembers wanting to kiss the ground when he stepped off the plane in Atlanta following his July 23, 1990 trade from the Phillies (in exchange for pitcher Joe Boever). "We won a lot of ballgames. It was great to be on a winning team."

He was a fan favorite in Atlanta, especially considering his less-than-star stature, and a group of devoted followers even formed a fan club called Marvin's Free Men.

Freeman, a tall, lanky righthander (6-7, 222), enjoyed his best season, however, following his release by the Braves after the 1993 season. During the strike-shortened 1994 campaign, he went 10-2 with Colorado, primarily as a starter, posted the third-best ERA (2.80) in the NL, and finished fourth in Cy Young Award balloting. One of the first pitchers to succeed while plying his trade in Denver's mile-high air, he retired from the game three years later.

"I was in spring training with the Blue Jays," said Freeman, originally a second-round draft pick by the Phillies in 1984. "They're roster was pretty set, and they wanted to send me to Triple-A. Initially, I decided not to go, but after I sat at home for a month, I decided I still had some baseball left in me. I played in one game for Syracuse in 1997 and felt like I had lost the desire to go out and compete. Starting over at 34 wasn't something I wanted to do."

Freeman - who works on the side as a pitching instructor for kids, ages 10-18, at a local sports academy - resides in Olympia Fields, Ill. He has been married to his high school sweetheart, Arnetta, for 24 years. Life has treated him well.

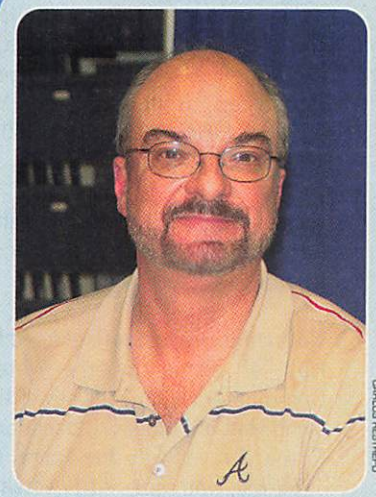
"I'm still piecing it together," said Freeman, whose career record was 35-28 with 5 saves and a 4.64 ERA with the Phillies, Braves, Rockies and White Sox. "I feel a little banged up, I guess, from old age, but I have my health and my family. What else could I ask for?"

Well, how about a golfer's dream - a hole-in-one?

Freeman's got that, too, scoring his first ace (8-iron on the 157-yard 13th hole) Oct. 30 at Coyote Run Golf Course in Flossmoor. That also ought to impress his pitchers.

HOW I MADE IT TO THE MAJORS

BOB PRESSLEY
COLLECTIBLES DEALER


CARLOS RESTREPO

BY STEVE FALL

ALTHOUGH Bob Pressley always loved sports, he never thought much about working in baseball while growing up. In fact, nobody even had a job like he has back then.

"There wasn't this type of business – this collecting of sports material wasn't in existence so to speak. I was in on it at the ground level," said Pressley. "There were some card collecting shows on a very small basis in the 1970s. But it was the late '80s, when I got into it, that the memorabilia part took off."

Pressley owns and operates B.P. Sports Collectibles. His store, located outside of Atlanta in the northwest suburb of Marietta, features autographs and memorabilia from all-time baseball greats and numerous Braves stars.

"Like a lot of people with these types of businesses, it was a hobby turned business," said the 60-year-old Pressley. "I was a baseball card/sports fan. I decided to dabble in this a little bit, playing around with it part-time. It got so lucrative and took off in the late '80s that I just decided to start doing it full-time."

B.P. Sports Collectibles conducts significant business over the phone and on the internet. Pressley receives calls from people all over the country looking to order collectibles. He holds six-to-eight autograph signings per year. Much of Pressley's time is spent preparing for these events. A recent show featured Bobby Cox, Kelly Johnson, Otis Nixon and Chris Chambliss, as well as coveted Braves prospect Jason Heyward.

Pressley grew up in Connecticut rooting for some great New York Yankees teams. He attended Georgia Tech, but returned to New England after college. He moved to Florida in the late 1970s and started working for Toyota. In 1982, he relocated to the Atlanta area to serve as general sales manager for Marietta Toyota. Pressley also began collecting and attending small collectibles shows. He then decided to promote a few shows himself on a part-time basis.

"It became lucrative enough that by 1988 I said, 'You know what, I'm going to get into this full-time.' And I jumped into it and have been into it ever since," he said.

In the late 1980s through the mid-1990s, Pressley would run one show per month, with two-to-four autograph guests at each. Guests included legends such as Mickey Mantle, Joe DiMaggio and Ted Williams. He estimates that he had 85-to-90 percent of the living Baseball Hall of Fame members at those shows.

After the Braves' Worst-to-First season in 1991, Braves players also began making frequent appearances at his events. In the early 1990s, Pressley opened his retail location, currently located on Marietta Square and online at bpsports.com.

"Obviously, you need to have an interest or a passion for it," said Pressley, when asked what it takes to make a career in baseball collecting. "If you started out as a collector, you can learn and see a lot just by going to events. Whether they're stores or large shows, you'll pick up and learn a lot if you're observant on what's going on with the hobby."

Pressley added that most dealers will share advice to help budding collectors.

ALUMNI NOTES

Dave Johnson (2B/1B, 1973-75) was named manager of Team USA for the World Baseball Classic. **Felipe Alou** (OF/1B, 1964-69) will manage the Dominican Republic, and **Vinny Castilla** (3B/SS, 1991-92, 2002-03) will manage Mexico.

Kansas City signed **Horacio Ramirez** (LHP, 2003-06) to a one-year contract.

No former Braves were elected to the Hall of Fame by the Veterans Committee, which consists of the 64 living Hall of Famers. Closest among former Braves was **Joe Torre** (C/1B, 1960-68), who received 19 votes, 29.7 percent of those cast. Election required 48 votes or 75 percent of those cast.

The Giants signed **Edgar Renteria** (SS, 2006-07) to a two-year contract.

The Diamondbacks named **Brett Butler** (OF, 1981-83) manager of Reno in Triple-A Pacific Coast League.

Tommy Burgess (Coach, 1978) died at his home in Canada on Nov. 24. He was 81 and a member of the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame.

"Red" Murff (RHP, 1956-57), who was best known for discovering Hall of Fame pitcher Nolan Ryan, died Nov. 28 in Tyler, Tex., at age 87. He is also known for encouraging **Phil Niekro** to use his knuckleball in game situations. In 1956, Murff made the Milwaukee Braves as a 35-year-old rookie and picked up a save on Opening Day in relief of **Lou Burdette**. He was 2-2 with the 1957 pennant-winning Braves and later was a player-manager for the franchise's farm team in Jacksonville, Fla. He was a member of the Texas Baseball Hall of Fame and the Texas Scouts Association Hall of Fame.

Hall of Famer **Gaylord Perry** (RHP, 1981) will be the featured speaker at the 5th Annual Hot Stove Banquet & Silent Auction on Jan. 30 at Mark Clark Hall on The Citadel campus. The Hot Stove Banquet is an annual collaboration between the Charleston RiverDogs and The Citadel. The reception and auction begin at 6 p.m. with the dinner at 7:30. Tickets are $65 per person and include dinner, beverages and admission to the auction. For individual tickets or information, contact the RiverDogs at (843) 723-7241. Tickets also can be purchased online at riverdogs.com.

Hank Aaron (OF/1B, 1954-74) has committed to a sixth annual "Evening with Hank Aaron" in 2009 to benefit the Greater Milwaukee Foundation. The affair sold out last year and raised $53,000.

Tim Spooneybarger (RHP, 2001-02) is a minor league free agent. He had Tommy John surgery in 2004 and again in 2005, missing most of 2005 and all of '06 and '07 before appearing in six Class-A games last year in the Baltimore farm system.

Phil Niekro (RHP, 1964-83, '87) signed autographs Dec. 13 for all who donated to Toys for Tots during an annual event in Lawrenceville.

The Cubs signed **Chad Fox** (RHP, 1997) to a minor league contract.

Don Baylor (Coach, 1999) rejoined the Rockies as hitting coach. He was the first manager in their history (1993-98).

Mark Teixeira (1B, 2007-08) was on the Georgia Tech sideline Nov. 20 when the Yellow Jackets beat Miami, 41-23. Teixeira attended Tech.

Bobby Bragan (Manager, 1963-66) was honored Nov. 13 by the Volunteers of America Texas with the 2008 Hero Award at a luncheon at the Colonial Country Club. Volunteers of America is one of the nation's largest and most comprehensive human service organizations.

Johnny Antonelli (LHP, 1948-50, '53, '61) was honored with the Lifetime Achievement Award Oct. 14 at the 68th annual Columbus Day luncheon in Rochester, N.Y.

BIRTHDAYS

JANUARY

3RD	ADRIAN GARRETT (66)
5TH	TOM KELLEY (65)
	MILT THOMPSON (50)
	JOHN RUSSELL (48)
	MARK REDMAN (35)
6TH	NORM CHARLTON (46)
	SCOTT THORMAN (27)
7TH	ALVIN DARK (87)
	CARLOS DIAZ (51)
	BRAYAN PENA (27)
8TH	CHUCK COTTIER (73)
	JOHN DEMERIT (73)
	DON DILLARD (72)
	BRUCE SUTTER (56)
	JEFF FRANCOEUR (25)
9TH	JULIO NAVARRO (73)
	PAT ROCKETT (54)
	OTIS NIXON (50)
	JAY POWELL (37)
10TH	JACK DITTMER (81)
11TH	JACK CURTIS (72)
	HANK FISCHER (69)
	BEN RIVERA (41)
13TH	LARRY JASTER (65)
	ELMER DESSENS (38)
	JOSE CAPELLAN (28)
14TH	SANDY VALDESPINO (70)
	TERRY FORSTER (57)
	TONY BRIZZOLARA (52)
15TH	MIKE MARSHALL (66)
	RAY KING (35)
17TH	TYLER HOUSTON (38)
19TH	KEVIN COFFMAN (44)
20TH	OZZIE GUILLEN (45)
21ST	DARRYL MOTLEY (49)
	CHRIS HAMMOND (43)
	WIL LEDEZMA (28)
22ND	JEFF TREADWAY (46)
23RD	CHARLIE SPIKES (58)
	ALAN EMBREE (39)
	MARK WOHLERS (39)
25TH	MEL ROACH (76)
	ED GOODSON (61)
	JUNIOR MOORE (56)
	TERRELL WADE (36)
	PHIL STOCKMAN (29)
26TH	BOB UECKER (74)
	KEVIN BLANKENSHIP (46)
27TH	RUSTY RICHARDS (44)
28TH	LARVELL BLANKS (59)
	FREDI GONZALEZ (45)
	JERMAINE DYE (35)
29TH	JOHN FULLER (59)
	JASON SCHMIDT (36)
	BRIAN EDMONDSON (36)
	JAIR JURRJENS (23)
30TH	AL VEIGEL (92)
	DAVE JOHNSON (66)

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DEAL OR NO DEAL

THE OFF-SEASON has been rather sluggish so far, except for teams located in New York. The Braves did all they could to sign A.J. Burnett, but they couldn't figure out a way to move Baltimore closer to Atlanta. Burnett picked the Yankees because his wife won't fly. She can travel from their Baltimore-area home to New York in three hours, compared to a much longer trip to Atlanta.

In a similar setback of lesser import, the Braves lost Mike Hampton to the Astros because he reportedly was going through a divorce and wanted to be closer to his children in Arizona.

Then there were the drawn-out Jake Peavy trade negotiations with the Padres, and you have to wonder if there ever was a real chance of the Braves getting the 2007 Cy Young Award winner. The Padres dragged the Cubs through the torture chamber, too, and dropped them just like they did the Braves.

Through it all, Frank Wren did make one interesting deal that landed two pitchers that could prove quite significant in 2009. Javier Vazquez is a solid candidate to win 15 games with Bobby Cox managing him and with what should be an outstanding Braves bullpen behind him.

Whether or not Boone Logan will realize his potential in the bullpen remains to be seen, but he gives the Braves another serviceable lefty at the same time the Phillies are stocking up with lefty hitters.

Remember, Opening Day isn't until April 5. Much can still happen - and probably will.

Putting together off-season issues of ChopTalk is more challenging than doing it during the season, but that makes it more fun and rewarding, too. We're particularly happy with this issue and hope you are, as well.

As you probably have seen on page 5, ChopTalk recently rode into space with Shuttle astronaut Shane Kimbrough. We can't find a record anywhere of a baseball magazine going into orbit, so we're claiming to be the first until someone proves differently.

Our sincere thanks to Kimbrough, obviously a very dedicated Braves fan, for not only taking CT along for the ride, but also for having the photo taken and e-mailing it to us from the International Space Station. What a thrill for everyone at ChopTalk, as well as for all of our loyal readers.

Also this month, we're able to bring you a unique look into the lives of Rafael Soriano in the Dominican Republic and Martin Prado and Gregor Blanco in Venezuela. Our thanks to the players for their hospitality.

We also give you a head start on what promises to be the "feel-good" story of spring training - Lance Niekro working with his uncle, Phil Niekro, in an attempt to become a knuckleball pitcher and carry on the family legacy his late father, Joe, helped to create.

The further we get from 2005 and the Braves' unprecedented 14th straight division title, the more we understand just how incredibly special that achievement is. In fact, if we hadn't witnessed it, we'd probably think it was fiction.

No other organization in the history of professional sports has ever finished first in 14 straight seasons, and the likelihood that any team in a major pro league will ever duplicate or exceed that record is unimaginable.

That's why we think the Braves should permanently retire uniform No. 14 in honor of that achievement and to guarantee that future generations of fans won't have to count them. They'd always be able to see the "14" standing between Dale Murphy's "3" and Warren Spahn's "21."

Delivery of the December issue appeared to be slow across the board - not just to your home or office. As we tell you frequently, ChopTalk was mailed on schedule, just like it is every month. The problem is with the postal service that likely was running behind due to the Thanksgiving holiday and all the catalogs and other seasonal items in their system.

THIS ISSUE OF CHOPTALK was mailed Dec. 19. The February issue will be mailed Jan. 21.

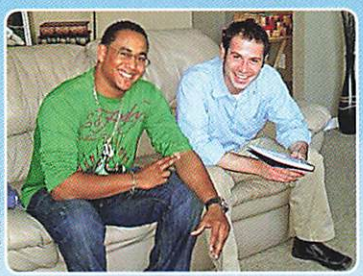
BEYOND BASEBALL

BY PATTY RASMUSSEN

Jair Jurrjens visits Carmen Cox, whose home he stayed in as a pro rookie in the Detroit organization, and chats with newspaper reporter Jon Morosi (below).

OLD TIMES

JAIR JURRJENS took a sentimental journey after the season to visit **Carmen** and **David Cox**, his minor league "host family" in 2005, his first year in professional baseball. Jurrjens traveled to Rockford, Michigan, where he played for the West Michigan Whitecaps, the Class-A affiliate of the Detroit Tigers. While there, he also visited with other host families, **Jim Jarecki**, general manager of the Whitecaps, and **Jon Morosi**, a reporter with the Detroit Free Press who covered Jurrjens when he played in the Tigers organization. The Coxes have hosted a number of players, including Braves minor league outfielder **Gorkys Hernandez** who arrived in the same trade that brought Jurrjens to Atlanta. Carmen said that Jurrjens, who was 19-years-old when he stayed with them, loved the converted game room that served as his bedroom because the windowless room made for great sleeping in!



PHOTOS SPECIAL

"We have always kept in touch with J.J. (Jurrjens), not as a baseball player, but as part of our family. To see him where he is today is phenomenal," said Carmen. "He calls us regularly and will call me for advice or just to tell me how he is doing. His visit was a promise he kept since he had not been able to get back here.

"We will be seeing him on our annual trek to spring training in Lakeland, Florida, where we keep in touch with all our players. I also get an opportunity to see him in Atlanta, because my corporate office is located there. When I am in town, I go to see him pitch, and then we get together afterwards."

JEFF FRANCOEUR and retired NFL players **Matt Stinchcomb** (Oakland, Tampa Bay), and **Morten Andersen** (Atlanta, New Orleans) joined forces with country music artists **Rhett Atkins** and **Matt Moore** at the Nov. 28 Rock4Research event, held at Wild Bill's in the Atlanta suburb of Lawrenceville. The event drew a crowd of 1,500, including surprise appearances by **Brian McCann** and **Clint Sammons**. Rock4Research benefited the Children's Tumor Foundation that raises money for research of Neurofibromatosis (NF), a painful and currently incurable nerve disorder. Francoeur's involvement stems from his friendship with **Chad Leathers**, a former teammate from their Parkview High School days. Chad's younger brother, **Drew**, has been fighting NF since age 10. In 2007, Francoeur donated $500 to the Children's Tumor Foundation for every home run he hit...

Chip and **Susan Caray** welcomed their fourth child, a boy, Tristan, on Nov. 19. Proud papa Chip said, "**Tristan** checked in at 6 pounds even, 19 1/2 inches long. He's doing just great." In an interesting twist of fate, **Pete Van Wieren**'s third grandchild, **Rebecca Hope Van Wieren** was born that same day. "Seven pounds, 12 ounces," said her grandpa. "She's cute as a button, and ready to be spoiled!" It wasn't the first time the Carays and Van Wierens welcomed grandchildren in close proximity. Their first grandchildren Chip's first child, daughter **Summerlyn**, and **Steve Van Wieren**'s daughter **Chaney**, were born just one day apart...

Matt Diaz took his nephews to watch the Nov. 14 evening launch of the Space Shuttle Endeavor. He was able to secure seats on the VIP viewing stand. "Along with about 1,500 other VIPs," joked Diaz. "It was a blast," he said. "But the 5-hour drive home stuck in the post-launch traffic made it a once-in-a-lifetime thing."...

Tim and **Kim Hudson** attended the Professional Athletes Outreach (PAO) Conference held in Dallas, Texas, Dec. 4-7. Christian recording artist **Jonny Diaz**, younger brother of **Matt Diaz**, was the featured performer at the conference...

John Smoltz once again lent a hand to the Atlanta Community Food Bank, joining Atlanta Falcons fullback **Ovie Mughelli**, in preparing Thanksgiving meals at the Thanksgiving Dish held in the kitchens of the Renaissance Waverly Hotel in northwest Atlanta. Smoltz, Mughelli, and a group of reporters from local media outlets snapped fresh green beans for an hour before splitting into groups to prepare turkey, dressing, sweet potatoes, gravy, and pumpkin pies for 2,009 people throughout Atlanta. A week later, Smoltz traveled to Detroit to watch his beloved Michigan State University Spartans take on the University of North Carolina Tar Heels in basketball. Unfortunately for Smoltz, UNC downed the Spartans by a resounding 98-63 final score...

Brian and **Ashley McCann** hosted a family Thanksgiving dinner at their new home in the Atlanta suburb of Suwannee. "It was nice to be in the new house and have the family over," said Ashley. "Everyone brought dishes, so it was actually

easy." The McCanns are looking forward to a ski trip with Ashley's family in January...

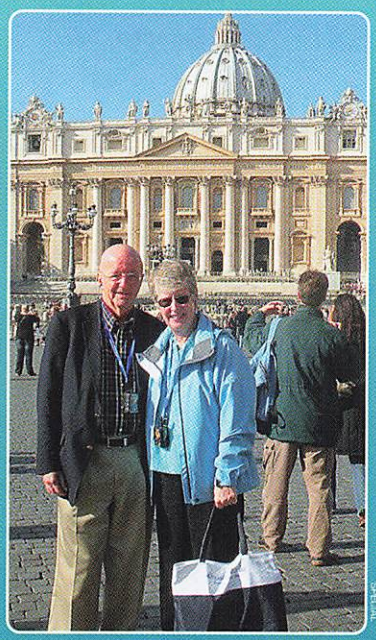
Kelly and **Lauren Johnson** spent their Thanksgiving in Kelly's hometown of Austin, Texas. "It was a pretty short trip," said Lauren, "but I was able to catch my first Texas Longhorns game - very intense! I've never seen so much state pride." The Longhorns beat their intrastate rival, Texas A&M, 49-9. The Johnsons traveled to St. Simon's Island, Ga., in early December to attend St. Louis Cardinals (and former Braves farmhand) pitcher **Adam Wainwright**'s Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) Golf Tournament. Other Braves who participated in the tournament included **Blaine Boyer** and **John Smoltz**...

Lang Whittaker, executive editor of SLAM online magazine, a hip-hop influenced basketball magazine, has signed a book deal with Scribner to write a memoir entitled, "Searching for **Bobby Cox**." Whittaker, a native Atlantan now living in New York, is a lifelong Braves fan. "I'm writing the book as lessons I've learned from being a Braves fan over the last 20 years, this era of excellence we Braves fans have been able to enjoy," said Whittaker. "...The one thread running through that entire time is Bobby Cox." Whittaker said he first took notice of the Braves at the start of the 1982 season, when the team ran off 13 wins in a row. "I learned all the players names, had a commemorative team poster from Kroger on my door, and I wanted to be **Brett Butler** on my Little League team," he said. "I was furious when I couldn't get a number 22 jersey. Anyway, I was hooked." The book is scheduled for release in spring 2010...

Tim Hudson, **Jeff Francoeur** and **Blaine Boyer** spoke at a Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) event at Whitefield Academy in the Atlanta suburb of Mableton on Dec. 1. After dinner with several members of area baseball teams, they moved to the school's gymnasium and spoke to several hundred students, parents and coaches about their backgrounds, baseball, and faith...

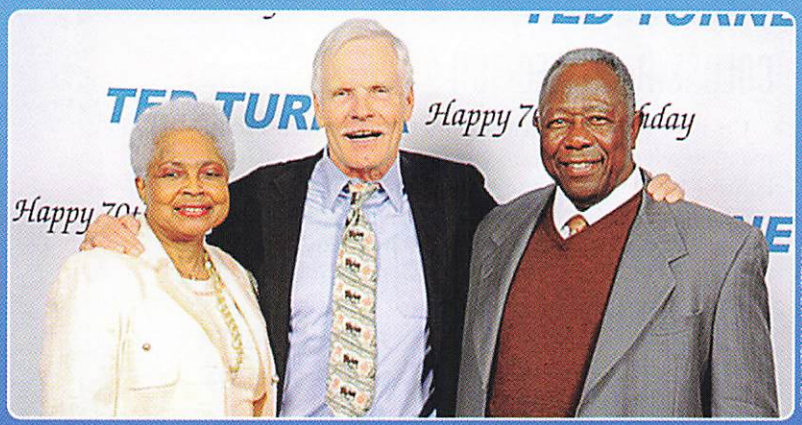
Among those fans at the Southeastern Conference (SEC) Championship game held Dec. 6 at the Georgia Dome in Atlanta were Florida Gator fan **Chipper Jones**, and Braves video coordinator, **Rob Smith**. Former Braves pitcher **Lance Cormier** and his wife, **Jamie**, were also at the game.

RETIRING IN STYLE



SPECIAL

BRAVES Hall of Fame broadcaster **Pete Van Wieren** and his wife, **Elaine**, had a fun-filled two-and-a-half-week Mediterranean cruise, but the trip wasn't without its glitches. "Our luggage didn't arrive until three days into the trip," said Pete, who announced his retirement Oct. 21 (Dec. '08 CT). "Our bags arrived the day the ship was set to leave Venice." The Van Wierens visited a number of exciting ports-of-call, including Dubrovnik, Croatia, Rome and Pisa, Italy, Monte Carlo, Monaco, and Marseille, France. Pete said he especially enjoyed Dubrovnik and Rome. Other highlights included St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City, the Coliseum, the leaning Tower of Pisa, and the casinos in Monte Carlo.



HAROLD ALAN PHOTOGRAPHERS

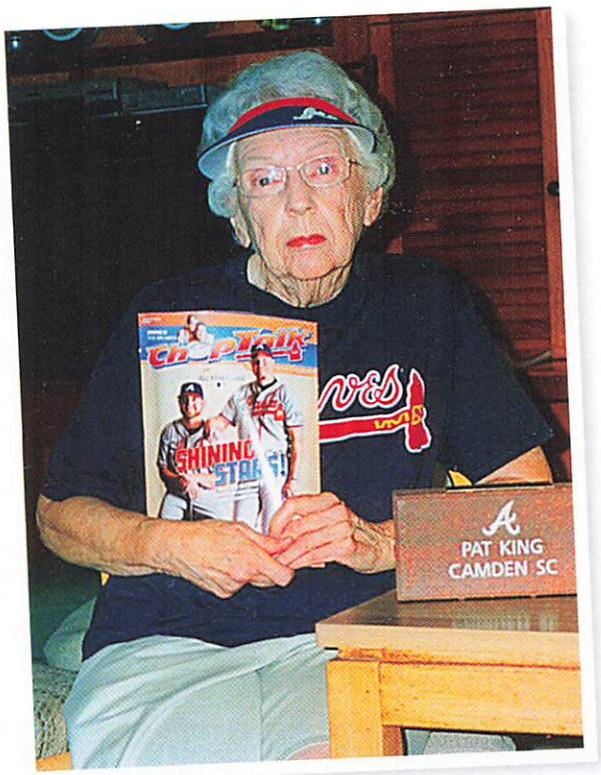
HAPPY 70TH!

HANK AARON and his wife, **Billye**, were among the guests at the lavish 70th birthday bash for former Braves owner (and 1-game manager) **Ted Turner** held Nov. 15 at the Georgia Aquarium in downtown Atlanta. Also in attendance were Braves Hall of Fame broadcaster **Ernie Johnson** and his wife, **Lois**, and **Paula Caray**, wife of the late **Skip Caray**, and her friend **Michelle Zarzaca**. Academy award and Grammy award winning songwriter, **Burt Bacharach**, was the evening's special entertainment. "It was amazing," said Paula. "Ted had his picture taken with every single guest. It was a beautiful setting, and the food was fantastic."

TALKIN' CHOP

LETTERS & PHOTOS FROM OUR READERS

WHETHER YOU'RE HAVING FUN AT TURNER FIELD, EXPERIENCING A CLOSE ENCOUNTER WITH YOUR FAVORITE BRAVES PLAYER, OR JUST SHOWING OFF YOUR COLLECTION OF BRAVES STUFF OR TRYING ON YOUR NEW BRAVES SHIRT, WE WANT TO HEAR ABOUT IT AND SEE A PICTURE.



LOYAL IN S. CAROLINA

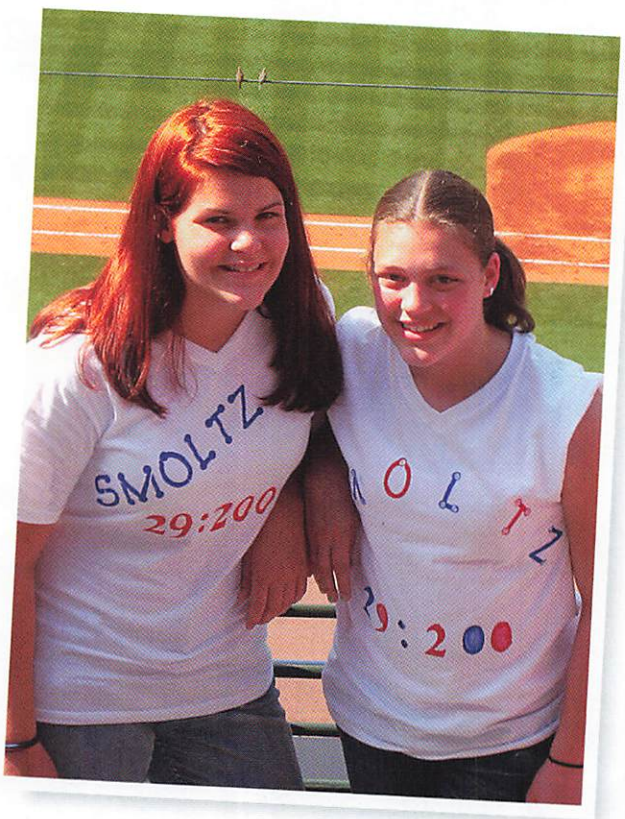
I wish Pat were smiling in this picture, for she is a true very happy Braves fan and travels to Turner Field every year with her son to watch games. She also travels to Philadelphia to see the Braves play the Phillies in her son's hometown. Pat enjoys ChopTalk and supports the Braves charities via a birthday gift from her four children.

PATRICIA KING
Camden, S.C.

THE BIBLE OF BASEBALL

Janice Linthicum and Katelynn Workman of Portsmouth, Va., attended a Braves home game to cheer for the Braves and their favorite pitcher who had just won his 200th game in 2007. They added a verse to the baseball bible with Smoltz 29:200.

H.C. SCHENKENBERGER
Portsmouth, Va.



COLOSSAL COLLECTION

Up here in North Georgia, there isn't much excitement. Receiving the latest issue of ChopTalk is the highlight of my month! Ever since I subscribed in March 2007, I have thoroughly enjoyed poring over the articles, page after page. So much so, that I haven't lost one yet. I have kept every issue so far, and I don't plan on stopping. Thanks, ChopTalk, and go Braves!

JOSEPH FOWLER
Blairsville, Ga.

EAGER FOR '09

I'm 91 years old and have been a Braves fan as long as I can remember. I'm always sad when the season ends, but can't wait for the next season to begin. In the meantime, I have ChopTalk to enjoy each month. It keeps me up on what is happening. Have a great spring training, and best wishes for good luck and lots of wins next season!

IRENE CLAPP
Greensboro, N.C.

CHOPTALK AND THE ATLANTA BRAVES SUPPORT OUR TROOPS

THE BIG CHAIR

I have been a Braves fan since I was 7 years old and first moved to Atlanta. Now as a U.S. Army officer recently returned from Baghdad, I make sure to spread the Braves' fan base wherever the Army sends me. This photo is from Al Faw Palace at Camp Victory Iraq. Everyone has his or her photo taken in this chair, so I thought it only fitting that my photo was taken there in this cap.

KRISTINA HEISE
Washington, D.C.

ORIENTATION

My nephew, Brendan Avery (not named after Steve Avery), was born two months early, on July 14, 2008. Because he was in the neo-natal intensive care unit until early September and was not allowed out of the house much for six weeks, he was unable to attend any games. On the "freebie" tour day at the Ivan Allen Jr. Braves Museum at Turner Field (Nov. 15), he came with us. He enjoyed every bit of seeing the place where he will spend plenty of time next year! No doubt he'll be a huge Braves fan like his mommy and Auntie.

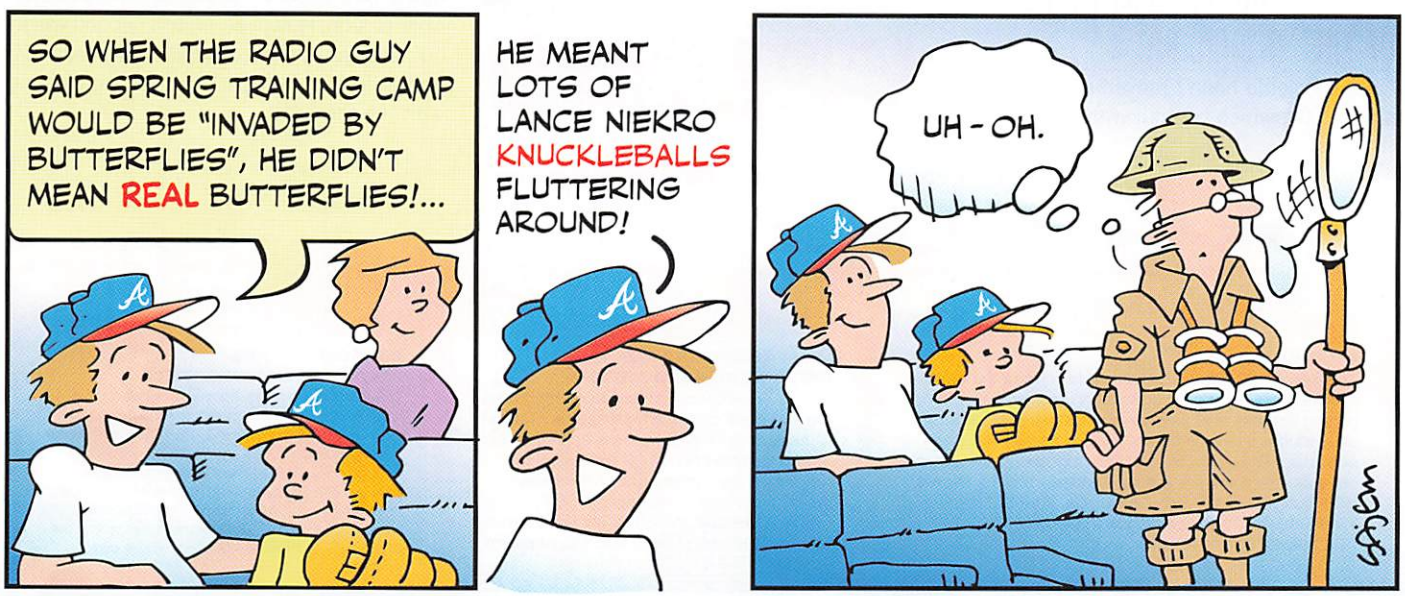
CRISTA SIMON
Fayetteville, Ga.

YOUR PICTURES

We **really** look forward to receiving your photos that show your Braves spirit. Please keep in mind, however, that for publication purposes, **photos sent by e-mail must be "high-resolution" images**. Check the setting on the side of your digital camera and adjust it to create the largest possible files. Also keep in mind that **photos taken with a camera phone cannot reproduce well enough to meet our publication standards. We cannot use computer printouts either.**

Please continue to send us your photos! But please be sure to send high-resolution images by e-mail to **letters@choptalkonline.com**, or hard-copy snapshots that are professionally printed via regular mail to **Talkin' Chop, P.O. Box 80750, Conyers, Ga. 30013-8750.**

RETURN OF THE KNUCKLER


SO WHEN THE RADIO GUY SAID SPRING TRAINING CAMP WOULD BE "INVADED BY BUTTERFLIES", HE DIDN'T MEAN REAL BUTTERFLIES!...
HE MEANT LOTS OF LANCE NIEKRO KNUCKLEBALLS FLUTTERING AROUND!
UH - OH.

HORSING AROUND

JOHN SMOLTZ was all-state in basketball, as well as baseball, in his days at Waverly High in Lansing, Mich., and he retains an intense love for the sport.

On Nov. 30, he got a chance to demonstrate that when he attended practice with the University of Georgia's men's team in Athens at the invitation of Bulldogs associate head coach Pete Herrmann. The two became friends in the 1980s when Hermann's Navy team played at Michigan State, where Smoltz nearly attended on a basketball scholarship.

"Anyone that knows me knows that I love basketball," Smoltz said. "I've played it the longest, I continue to play it, I've coached it and I hope to continue coaching and playing long after my baseball career is over. It was a privilege to be invited over to meet these young men today, and to give them some words of encouragement."

Smoltz spoke to the team for 15 minutes and then took on Georgia head coach Dennis Felton is a game of HORSE.

Smoltz lost, but he made it interesting. Felton led S-to-0 before Smoltz suggested a change in the playing rules: the winner had to make the winning shot *twice*. Smoltz then picked up two quick letters, tying the score, before the Georgia coach hit a pair of 3-point shots to win. Neither player tried a shot inside of 3-point range, and Smoltz even took many shots from beyond the NBA 3-point stripe of 23 feet, 9 inches.

THE CONTINUING ADVENTURES OF THE "ATOMIC ANT"

Luis Polonia hasn't played in the majors since 2000, which he split with the Yankees and Tigers. But he's still playing!

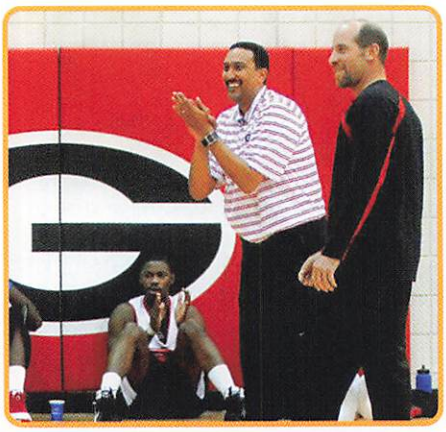
Braves fans should remember Polonia as a member of the 1995 World Championship team. During the regular season, he batted .264 with no homers and 2 RBIs in 28 games after being acquired from the Yankees on Aug. 11. In the postseason, though, he hit a composite .316 (6-for-19) and even hit a home run as the starting leftfielder in Game 4 of the World Series against Cleveland's Orel Hershiser.

Now 45 years old, Polonia broke the Dominican League records in November for both career hits and career runs scored. He already held the record for career triples. He ranks second in doubles, walks and steals.

His fans know Polonia, who is listed generously at 5-8, 152 pounds, as "la Hormiga Atomica." Translated, that means the Atomic Ant!

AQUILAS CIBAENAS

At age 45, former Brave Luis Polonia holds many of the career hitting records in the Dominican League.



ASHLEY CONNELL

John Smoltz and University of Georgia men's basketball coach Dennis Felton engage in a friendly game of HORSE, while the Bulldogs players watch.

Polonia, who plays for Aquilas Cibaenas, has a .308 lifetime batting average in the Dominican, compared to .293 in his big league career. He also runs a baseball instructional academy in the Dominican.

UPDATE

Last month, we told you about the work of former Braves reliever Tom House (1971-75), now the pitching coach at Southern Cal, who was trying to create pro pitchers from two young athletes from India who had never played baseball at any level until six months ago. Lefthander Rinku Singh, 20, and righthander Dinesh Patel, 19, had an initial workout Nov. 9 before numerous scouts but neither received an offer to sign. However, after a second workout, both were signed by Pittsburgh Nov. 24, and will be in minor league spring training with the Pirates.

FAN CLUBS

BRAVES 400 CLUB

BRAVES 400 CLUB
The Braves 400 Club is the official fan club of the Atlanta Braves. It is a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting baseball at all levels. Annual membership is $25 and includes a newsletter and the opportunity to participate in activities such as road trips, luncheons, the annual banquet, and charitable events. Send payment to: Braves 400 Club, P.O. Box 7689, Atlanta, Ga. 30309. For more information, call the organization's hotline at (770) 416-4539 or visit braves400.org.

MILWAUKEE BRAVES HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

MILWAUKEE BRAVES HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
The Milwaukee Braves Historical Association is a non-profit organization that promotes the memory of the Milwaukee Braves (1953-65). Annual membership is $25 and includes a newsletter. Send payment to: Milwaukee Braves Historical Association, 6700 N. Range Line Rd., Glendale, Wisc. 53209. For information, call (414) 347-1212 or visit 57braves.com.

BOSTON BRAVES HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

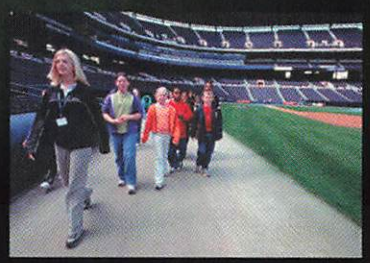
BOSTON BRAVES HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
The Boston Braves Historical Association is a non-profit organization dedicated to keeping alive the memory of the Braves in the city where the franchise began in 1871 and that it represented through 1952. Annual membership is $15 and includes a newsletter. Send payment to: Boston Braves Historical Association, P.O. Box 5668, Marlboro, Mass. 01752. For more information, call (508) 485-1423 or visit Boston-braves.com.

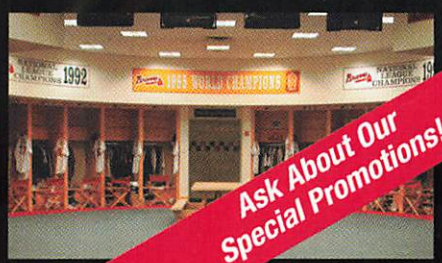
VISIT TODAY!

Visit the Braves Museum at AISLE 134 and view more than 600 Braves artifacts and photographs. See items from the team's beginning in Boston in 1871 to present day Atlanta, including the 14 Straight Exhibit.

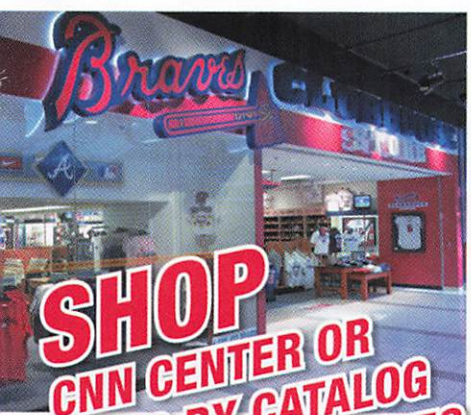
TOUR TURNER FIELD 404-614-2311

Take a one-hour Turner Field guided tour, offered daily, to many places off limits during games. Group and school tours are offered year-round, including specialized tours on the subjects of math, social studies, art and careers in sports. Call 404-614-2311.





Ask About Our Special Promotions!



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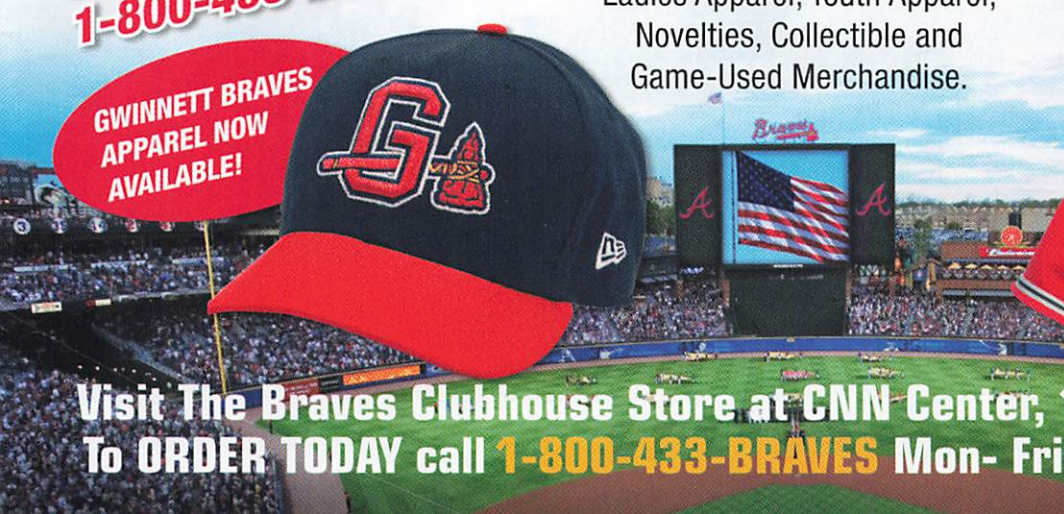

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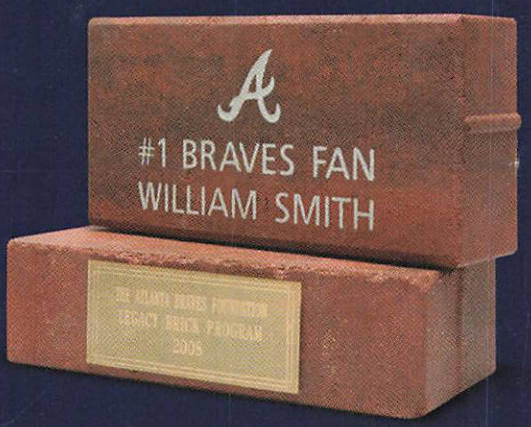

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